

Bloodlines, Ball Gowns, Trashed in the Hotel Room:
Hegemonic Processes of Debutantes as Southern Social
Royalty

By

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Acknowledgments

Two years and seven months ago, I was sitting on a grand stage in a long, white dress clutching a bouquet of red roses amidst two hundred other young women. We had all just been presented to society as debutantes by the North Carolina Terpsichorean Club. Although I was supposed to be smiling daintily for the cameras and audience members, I was suffering from a pounding migraine and could sense I would soon be sick to my stomach. My premonition proved correct soon after exiting the concert hall. The night of my debut brought laughter, pain, tears, vomit, and beautiful photographs that would impressively make these last three seem unthinkable, but at the time I thought the occasion would only produce a humorous story to share with friends. With the encouragement and support of family, friends, and faculty members within the sociology department, however, I began to see academic potential in my experience as a debutante-insider that would motivate larger sociological questions outside of my own story. I am proud to now turn my experience as a debutante into what I hope will be a meaningful contribution both to research on the reproduction of unequally distributed capital in North Carolina and to dialogue on issues of choice within the hegemonic culture of debdom.

This process of turning my experience into a platform on which to conduct sociological research began when, during the spring of 2014, I met with Prof. Andy Andrews and Prof. Lisa Pearce to discuss possible areas of research for an honors thesis in sociology. With their guidance and input, I confidently chose my research topic. For this reason, I am thankful to both Prof. Andrews and Prof. Pearce for their formative encouragement and advice. Had they not taken the time to meet with me, I would not have continued so determinedly in my efforts to become a senior honors thesis student. I am also thankful to Prof. Pearce for, at the end of this process, providing me with support once again as a second reader.

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This research was also made possible by the twenty-two participants who each gave up at least an hour of their time to contribute to my research in a semi-structured in-depth interview setting. Their willingness to share their thoughts and experiences with me is the heart and soul of the creation of this paper, and I am incredibly thankful for the participation of each individual.

The title of this paper should be recognized as a reference to the creative genius of artist Ella Yelich-O'Connor (or "Lorde" as she is known on stage), specifically in her song "Royals." I was inspired by her original lyrics "bloodstains, ball gowns, trashed in the hotel room," as I felt that the imagery put forth in her song gave life to both the consent and coercion at play within hegemonic debutante culture. For example, wearing formal clothes and consuming alcohol in hotel rooms are cited by young women as fun aspects of the debutante experience. However, her inclusion of "bloodstains" also speaks to how this event may present problems of discomfort for participants. Because the topic of bloodshed did not make an appearance in the interviews, I replace "bloodstains" with "bloodlines" in the title to speak more to the hereditary nature of debutante participation, as it is passed down through generations. Retaining the word "blood"

here still communicates, I hope, the urgency of the pressure put on young women to carry on a family tradition. Thus I would like to acknowledge that the work of Lorde has been a useful resource that has allowed me to creatively imagine how I can best express my research.

I am also brimming with gratitude for my two parents, Martha-Duke and Herb Ormond, who, despite our different approaches to discussing debutante culture, have never once stopped encouraging me to carry out this research. Their support has given me the strength and energy to write this paper, and I am thankful to have parents who believe in me unconditionally. Finally, I would like to thank my partner and best friend Charlie Shelton for not only accompanying me in solidarity to my own debutante ball, but also for being my constant rock throughout this research process, listening to me patiently and sincerely as a selfless resource in times of both excitement and discouragement. Having you by my side, Charlie, is the highest honor I could ever be awarded in this life.

Introduction

Just a Symbol

“OMG sewwwwww excited to FiNaLIY join society as a mild young lady, after not actually existing for the last nineteen years! Big thanks to the male population for allowing me this brief moment of ‘visibility!’ LOL, NO ONE LOVES PATRIARCHY LIKE I DO.” – My Facebook status, September 6, 2012

On the eve of my impending “presentation to society” in the 88th group of North Carolina debutantes, I felt shame and dread concerning my participation—quite contrary to the women surrounding me whom, I perceived, were either complacent or even giddy to be making their debut. This particular ball, started in 1926 by the Terpsichorean Club of Raleigh, continues a tradition of inviting nineteen-year-old women from all across the state to participate in a summer of regional parties, followed by a long weekend in September of cocktails, luncheons, dances, and a presentation ceremony held in downtown Raleigh. I was to be among the two hundred-

some women presented on stage in a long, white dress carrying ripe, red roses and clutching my father's arm, and I was desperate to communicate my resistance. Indeed, I wanted to show my own social circle—anyone who may hear of my experience, see pictures online or in the paper, or attend the ball themselves—that I did not align myself with debutante culture: my participation was one born out of familial pressure and new insights as to what the concept of “choice” really means. Feeling that my status as a deb did not accurately describe the “real me,” I wanted to distance myself from this world of white privilege, patriarchal proclamations, and material excess—hence the social media post featured above.

Therefore I was taken aback when five women who were making their debut alongside me—three of whom I had the impression were rather enthusiastic about the occasion— “liked” this status on Facebook, communicating affirmative agreement with my snarky attitude towards the debutante ball. Contrary to the black and white nature of debutante perspectives that I assumed as given, these women were showing a more nuanced understanding of deb participation—one involving both support for the ritual and an awareness that the whole occasion may be acknowledged as rather absurd.

This tension between enthusiastic and eye-rolling participation appeared the next day—the day of the presentation ceremony—as a few other debutantes and I discussed our views on the ball, as prompted by my Facebook status. Some of these women chuckled over my sarcastic words, saying, “I personally thought it was hilarious.” Others offered apprehensive laughter, indicating that they were not, in fact, so comfortable with my cyber proclamation that debdom was a big, sexist joke. One such woman made a comment that would stick with me thereafter, tumbling through my mind and creating exponentially more question marks with each reverberation off the walls of my brain. This comment, indeed, motivated the very research study

that is presented in this paper. She said to all of us: “I mean, everyone knows the deb ball used to be this weird, sexist thing, but it doesn’t mean anything now. Now it’s just a symbol.”

But—I have asked myself ever since—a symbol of what?

Why debutante balls?

As a student of sociology, I have found debutante balls a worthy area of study, for both academic and personal reasons. Indeed, the social phenomenon of debutante balls should be of particular interest to sociologists, as the events—which, in reality, are not comprised of just a single ball, but a multiple months-long process—are opportune sites of studying the intersections of race, class, gender, region, and family. Certainly the North Carolina debutante ball may be seen as a microcosm of all these things, as, more often than not, all participating families are white; the fee for merely accepting an invitation is nearly \$3,000; strictly nineteen year-old women are presented strictly by men (usually a father) to society, with the traditional rhetoric of being available for marriage; the ball is region-specific (only families currently living in North Carolina may be invited); and women can participate by invite only, which is based, in large part, on family legacy (if their family has prominent historical ties to North Carolina and to the tradition of the debutante ball.) Considering these intersections, my research lends the argument that two of the primary functions of the social process are to maintain ties between prominent social figures in the state and to pass social status—and, consequentially, opportunity for gaining material wealth—onto succeeding generations. Therefore, the Terpsichorean debutante ball is not only a rite of passage that marks the coming-of-age for a certain group of young women: it is also a cultural site of reproducing wealth, status, and social elitism in North Carolina, which, as I will expand on in my discussion of the data, has implications not only for the small circle of

debutante families, but for the overarching economic and social organization of North Carolina as a whole.

Other sociologists, such as Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár in “The Study of Boundaries in Social Sciences,” have set a precedence of sociological study of the maintenance of social boundaries—a research concept that neatly applies to the practice of debutante balls. In Lamont and Molnár’s work, the sociologists point to the continuation of social rituals and traditions as a crucial means by which to reaffirm social boundaries. Indeed, Lamont and Molnár describe these practices themselves as symbolic boundaries, meaning that they serve to cultivate a shared understanding among social actors that differences between groups are legitimate (Lamont and Molnár 169). Though debutante balls are not explicitly mentioned in Lamont and Molnár’s work, the exclusive nature and “us versus them” mentality present in the events, particularly brought to light by the need for an invitation to participate (which cannot be acquired by application), reveals highly managed gatekeeping for group inclusion surrounding the culture. Furthermore, the fact that the event is purely social and that criteria for inclusion involves several interrelated factors, such as race, class, gender, region, and family connection, suggests that group membership is not arbitrary nor based on meritocracy, but rather seals itself around certain overlapping social identities (e.g. being a wealthy, white woman whose grandmother once made her own debut in North Carolina.) Therefore, studying debutante balls—how certain groups of people participate in them and why—will enrich current sociological research on how social boundaries are constructed, perceived, and upheld.

Debutante balls have been studied across multiple disciplines, but not commonly through a sociological lens that seeks understanding and interpretation. Indeed, many reports on debutante balls I read in preparation for this research concentrate on mere description,

consequentially failing to explain and interpret. This is a problem I understood better upon working with fellow classmates to workshop our individual research projects: I often paired up with a colleague for reciprocal advice and feedback on our work, but found myself answering questions such as, “so how do you get invited to be a deb?” and “what do they do on stage?” rather than “what sociological theories are you building on?” I have to admit that I, myself, would probably be distracted by the fascinations of the surface-level workings of debutante culture, had I not been a part of it myself three times—once as a participant and twice as an observing family member. However, already knowing what the debutantes do on stage, what they wear, and where the events take place, I am able to take my research a step beyond these descriptive inquiries and ask participants interpretative questions about their own experiences, such as what decision-making processes they employed to either accept or decline their invitation and what the ball has come to mean to their families. Therefore, my insider position enables me to include something crucial in my study that other examinations of the debutante ball have largely left out: participant rationalization and perceived meaning. Addressing these phenomena within debutante culture, I hold, will enable understanding of whether or not the debutante ball will continue with such vivacity in North Carolina—a significant question in determining not only the state of the ritual itself, but in examining the continuation of social elitism and unequal distribution of capital within North Carolina as a southern state.

Research question

The aforementioned observations during the 2012 debutante ball—nuanced reactions to my angst-ridden Facebook status and obvious obscurity surrounding the meaning of making one’s debut—have been the driving forces behind my decision to utilize my experience as a debutante to carry out qualitative research. Furthermore, preexisting sociological knowledge

about social boundaries and how symbolic rituals and group events are employed to maintain these divides prompted me to direct my research towards how participants, themselves, feel about their position within this clearly-drawn social circle. Why do women today participate in the debutante ball? Why do families want their daughters to make their debut? What does the ritual mean to participants and their families? If, as my own experience has shown, a tension exists within participants between desire to debut and awareness that the event is laughable, how do participants reconcile this tension? The focus of my research, then, boils down to participant motivation/rationalization and insider perception of debutante culture as a way to study why the ritual is still practiced today.

In asking these questions to twenty-two debutante-culture insiders through a semi-structured interview setting, I hoped to find patterns that would help me determine why the debutante ball exists in 2015—after all, if no one agrees to participate, there is no debutante ball. What do these women and their families believe that the debutante ball will give them? How do they rationalize their decision? These questions motivate my research, as I attempt to shine some light on what allows the debutante ball to not only survive, but, indeed, to thrive in North Carolina to this day.

After analyzing these twenty-two interviews, I found that participation in the debutante ball is ensured via a hegemonic process in which families and debutante organizers offer young women an incentive, such as pleasing family members, spending time with friends, and/or having fun, if—in exchange—these women give up something else, such as comfort during the presentation ceremony and/or self-determined identity and/or personal principles. This combination of consent and coercion constitutes the North Carolina Terpsichorean debutante ball as a hegemonic institution that goes largely unquestioned by insiders, because an illusion of free

will of participation has been created. This process of continuing participation is practiced by families and debutante organizers so that group members' economic, social, and cultural capital may be displayed via the presentation of women as debutantes. In this way, I found that the debutante process de-individualizes and homogenizes the group of participating women and turns them into objects of their families' socioeconomic status. Consequentially, this ritual, I argue, contributes to the unequal distribution of capital and socioeconomic stratification within North Carolina.

What is the North Carolina Terpsichorean Debutante Ball?

The North Carolina Debutante Ball is hosted by the Terpsichorean Club—a social club comprised by young men (ages twenty-one to thirty-five) from Raleigh and elected by secret processes. It is held every September in Meymandi Concert Hall in downtown Raleigh. One cannot apply to be accepted to make her debut, but rather Terpsichorean Club members and their wives hear from past participants and secret nominators throughout the state as to who should be invited to debut. Consequentially, inclusion is largely based on social connections. Invitations are sent out in April of each year to nineteen-year-old women from all across the state—a time that is understood to be the summer after a young woman's first year in college. Individual towns across the state, such as Greensboro, Charlotte, and Durham may have their own municipal debutante balls, but Raleigh's city debutante ball operates only at the state-wide level. Indeed, the North Carolina Terpsichorean debutante ball is understood to be the last surviving state-wide debutante ball in the nation. Parties are held throughout the summer leading up to the ball in the west (Winston-Salem), east (Greenville), and finally central (Raleigh), before the weekend of the presentation ceremony.

The weekend of the presentation ceremony lasts from Thursday to Saturday, including a ceremony rehearsal, cocktails, dances, and a father-daughter luncheon. During the presentation ceremony Friday evening, two hundred-some women appear on stage one by one at Meymandi Hall wearing long, white dresses (often compared in the interviews to wedding dresses) and long, white gloves, carrying a bouquet of ripe, red roses. Each debutante has her moment to walk out on stage and meet her “chief marshal” (almost always her father, but in some cases a step-father or uncle), step forward for applause and a photograph, and find a seat on stage. The ball is led by a debutante from Raleigh, who is first in the procession, first in the recession, and receives a kiss on the cheek by the president of the Terpsichorean Club after all approximately two hundred women have stood and been officially “presented” to society. After the presentation ceremony, buses and, for some families, private limousines, take participants and their families to the Carolina Country Club for a ball, including dancing, eating, mingling, and, for those supposedly of the legal age, drinking. Tickets to the ball are limited, and most participants come with only family members, such as parents, siblings, grandparents. Some participants, depending on the strength of their connection to debutante culture, may also procure tickets for aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. Additionally, each debutante has an assistant marshal, who is always a male and is usually a peer, such as a brother, cousin, close friend, or boyfriend. Women who receive an invitation are asked by the Terpsichorean Club members to decline their invitation if they are engaged to be married.

Participation is allegedly based on family legacy and contribution to the community; the ritual claims to honor historically established families in North Carolina; non-white participants are a rarity; and the cost of accepting the invitation in itself is nearly \$3,000. Furthermore, the cost of needed accessories, such as dresses, tuxedos, shoes, rented cars, hotel rooms, etc. ensures

that the event is an expensive affair. For these reasons, receiving an invitation to make one's debut is considered by many to be an "honor," and it is common for debutante women to receive gifts from family, friends, and others involved in the debutante community during her "deb summer" as a token of congratulations.

Related Literature: Theorizing the Debutante Ball as Hegemony and as a Form of Capital

In an effort to understand why debutante balls exist today—nearly three hundred years after their inception in Victorian England—much sociological and anthropological research has been done over the years on the vast range of debutante balls present around the world (Escalas). It appears, though, that the ritual was a much-discussed topic in the academic realm in the 1960s and prior, after which the research largely drops out until the 1990s. Jennifer Edson Escalas shines some light on this phenomenon when she explains that during the 60s and early 70s, rituals such as the debutante ball held less of a prominent place in society. However, with the growing importance of conservative values and displays of material wealth that came to full fruition with the Reaganomics of the 1980s, debutante balls came back to life in the United States with a boom (Escalas). Perhaps this shows that criticisms of such rituals were better received during this period of decline, but as participation increased in the 80s, the ritual was seen as a more normalized aspect of American society; thus it received less scrutiny, going largely unquestioned by citizens and researchers alike. This correlation between increasing participation and decreasing criticism was surely visible in the academia I came across as I was researching past work on debutante balls. For this reason all of the work I draw on in my own research derived either up to the year 1960 or after the year 1990.

My work differs from that of previous literature in that many examinations of debutante culture to date have examined the phenomenon only insofar as describing the events themselves: the order of proceedings, the guidelines for invitations, the necessary accessories and manners for a debutante. Many of such articles struggle to find a balance between mere description and actual sociological analysis. As a result of my own aforementioned personal experience with the debutante ball, I am able to bypass the mere observational investigations of surface-level aspects of the ritual and to focus more intensely on perceptions and their implications. My own position, both as an insider of debutante culture and as a sociologist, makes my work unique in comparison to past research. For example, I am able to ask my participants more societal-level, overarching questions concerning family, group belonging, tradition, etc., rather than simply asking how, for example, the ceremony was conducted. Furthermore, none of the research I reviewed addresses the crucial question of why debutantes often exemplify such differing perceptions and degrees of enthusiasm or offers explanations as to how debutantes ultimately arrive at participation. Nevertheless, the previous academic works on debutante culture that I have reviewed have made crucial contributions to the existing research on choice and the reproduction of class, and these have been vastly helpful in the shaping of my own research question.

Debutante motivations and willingness

Every study that addressed the question of participant choice within debutante culture revealed that not all debutantes feel similarly about their participation—rather, there is a variation of proclamation of desire to make one’s debut across debutante balls. Some debutantes are resisters, but participating resisters, nonetheless. Others—as I will refer to them, “enthusiasts,” see no reason to question their participation in the debutante ball.

Enthusiasts

My preliminary research revealed that enthusiastic debutantes often explain this affinity for the debutante tradition as it relates to one's own family background and desire to "keep family tradition alive" (Kendall 124). For example, in Margaret Brown's documentary *The Order of Myths*, she found that the members of the MCA—Mobile, Alabama's white debutante society, which also acts as a Mardi Gras committee—saw holding onto history as a good thing. The 2007 head debutante of the MCA claimed that she saw it as a positive achievement that she was now getting to participate, because her grandmother was once a head debutante. Because the head debutante always knew she would one day be where her grandmother was, she had no reason to question her own participation. Even another deb in Mobile who did struggle with the decision of whether or not to participate chose affirmatively to make her debut in the end, because she saw it as an opportune time to embrace her family history and reconnect with her roots (*The Order of Myths*). Such a sentiment is echoed in Cynthia Lewis' findings on debutante motivations in Charleston and Dallas, as several debutantes claimed that they participated without a question or a single hesitation, due to family connections with the debutante ball (Lewis 12, 17). Indeed, such young women defended their choices to participate, citing that the original purpose of the debutante ball—to present daughters as formally eligible for marriage—is now irrelevant. Many denied the existence of patriarchy in the tradition and claimed that the main purpose of the entire event was just to have fun (Lewis 12).

Indeed, "fun" emerged throughout the research, alongside family and tradition, as a major reason why debutantes willingly participated and looked back on their experiences with fondness. In Diana Kendall's book *The Power of Good Deeds: Privileged Women and the Reproduction of the Social Upper Class*, in which she devotes a section to debutante culture, she

describes that compliant debutante participants cited fun as a primary reward from the debutante experience—“fun” in the sense of getting to attend parties and wear nice clothes, but also of being able to meet other men and women and build social connections (Kendall 121). Kendall notes, however, that for some debutantes it may be considered tacky to describe “fun” in terms of social networking, so therefore participants tended to just talk about the “experience” of being a debutante in vague and surface-level terms, as if they went through the entire process just for the “fun” of it (122).

The motivation of “fun” was similarly echoed in Lyn Harrison’s work on debutante culture in Australia, but Harrison describes the sentiment more in terms of heteronormative femininity. Indeed, Harrison claims that the entire reason many women make their debut is to fulfill a fantasy of being the center of attention and finding true, heterosexual love. For this reason, the three women she interviewed participated with pleasure and vehemently rejected the notion that the debutante ball was a classist, sexist event (Harrison 500). If these women did resist anything, it was feminist arguments against the debutante ball, and therefore they claimed that they were exercising their own independent choice in participation, whereas feminism was the school of thought constraining their free movement (501). More than anything, though, these debutantes defended their decision to participate on the grounds that it is a fun environment for them to exemplify traditionally feminine practices such as dressing up, fixing their hair, doing their make-up, and having a male date, all in a space where all eyes are on them (504, 505, 506). In defending their participation, these women also emphasized that the original meaning of the debutante ball is lost, and now it is solely a social event (504, 507).

The desire to be the center of the attention was shown in other works as well, such as Vendela Vida’s book *Girls on the Verge: Debutante Dips, Drive-bys, and other Initiations*. In

Vida's discussion on debutantes, she found that several young women enjoyed being treated like a "princess" for the evening, and likewise cited parties as a primary aspect of the debutante ball that made it a worthwhile experience (Vida 75, 60). Even participants who recognized the problematic nature of the debutante ball in terms of what it says about race, class, and gender found it fairly easy to shrug off these thoughts and return to the idea of "fun" as an ever-present justification to participate (69). Vida found that, in the event that the women themselves did not really want to participate, but rather it was their parents' idea, some of the debutantes still said that it was a good experience, because it was "fun" (60).

Resisters

Vida did not just find enthusiasts in her study, though. Vida, as well as several other authors, found mixed results when studying to what degree women were eagerly participating. Resisters were a common find in the studies, and these women often cited pressure to please their families as the primary reason for participation. One debutante in Vida's research even went as far as to say that her "decision" to participate as a debutante was not a decision on her part at all—it was essentially coerced participation, because the tradition aspect was so important to her family that it would have greatly upset her parents if she had not participated (58). Another debutante in Vida's study did not want to participate, but complied in the end, due to a bribe from her parents (60). A similar case occurred in Lewis' study, where a prospective debutante expressed to her parents that she did not want to participate and was met with an offer of a new Honda if she complied (Lewis 21). Another deb in Lewis' study struggled with her social conscience over the lavishness of the event, and so she compromised with her parents by wearing an old dress and donating the money that she would have spent on a new one to a charitable cause (23). Perhaps the most telling instance in Lewis' work on familial pressure to participate,

though, came from a debutante who saw an unquestionable association between family background and participation: “It isn’t choice. Are you the daughter of somebody who was somebody who was somebody, and that’s it. And if you are, and you’re not a heroin addict, you are there” (17).

The question of “choice” was a recurring theme in the literature—what do the women see as “choice” when they use the term to describe their participation in the debutante ball? The woman from Lewis’ study who was mentioned above boldly disqualified the word “choice” from being used to describe participation. Yet at the same time, it is not as if these women (as far as we are aware) are marched off to the coming-out ceremony with guns held at their pearl-laced backs. There seems to be an interesting degree of both consent and coercion that blur the lines of choice—a concept birthed by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci and synthesized by scholars Tony Bennett et. al in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*. Gramsci uses the terms ‘consent and coercion’ to describe the ways in which hegemonic—that is, largely unquestioned—institutions are upheld. In Gramsci’s theory, some dominant structure subordinates people to its power by utilizing “a more nuanced and sophisticated coupling of ‘consent and coercion:’” offering them something in return for their subjugation to the power structure’s will. In this way, the people have reason to consent, at least partially, to the system set in place. However, this system may also present some terms that the people are uncomfortable or unhappy with. Thus, although they consent to the system, due to pull factors, they also find themselves begrudgingly going along with a system that they do not fully agree with—in other words, they are also coerced. This coercion often goes unquestioned, however, as the presence of “consent” creates an illusion of free will (Bennett 192).

Gramsci's theory of hegemony requiring both consent and coercion is echoed in feminist scholar Nancy Hirschmann's piece "Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom." According to Hirschmann, patriarchy limits what women can even conceive of as choice, because patriarchy—as a hegemonic ideology that involves both consent and coercion—necessarily constrains women's movement and free choices (Hirschmann 1999). Hirschmann goes on to say that one reason why choice is hard to measure is that patriarchy has constructed the only reality that women have known, and these constructed realities facilitate a precisely feminine "self-conception that give rise to desire" (200). Therefore what appears easy to label as a woman's choice becomes complicated when one takes into account the possibility that women, as a hierarchically inferior group, have been conditioned through social structures—perhaps by "restriction, coercion, and force"—to desire that which they are now "choosing" (202). Hirschmann's theory deals directly with patriarchal powers and the constraints they create—a feature evident in the structure of the debutante ball, given the history of young women being introduced to the marriage market and the (recent) tradition of the debs being presented on their father's arm.

These aforementioned works, with their revelation of enthusiastic debs and resisting debs, raise interesting questions on insider perceptions of "choice," as it pertains to who is putting pressure on debutantes as they make their decision of whether or not to participate. The authors who have written explicitly on the debutante ball fail to adequately explore, however, the elements of choice and constraint that Hirschmann describes in making the debutante decision, because they miss a crucial comparison: familial constraint is present for both enthusiasts and resisters. According to the past research, enthusiasts participate because of family tradition, and resisters participate because of family pressure. The difference is that enthusiasts do not feel the

pressure in the same way that resisters do, because they are not resisting—they see participation as choice and therefore not as a matter of pressure. So if familial constraint is not the defining factor, then what is? What causes women of similar backgrounds and demographics to perceive their participation in the debutante ball in such different ways? This is the question the research fails to address.

Familial motivations: reproduction of class and capital

These findings on familial constraint yield the following question: Why is it so important to parents and families that their daughters, granddaughters, etc. participate? As stated above, I hypothesize that parents are interested in seeing their own social standing and rewards passed down to the children—a thought that is echoed in the aforementioned findings that tradition and family background play a vital role in the continuing existence of the debutante ball. The same authors that give a good deal of attention to participatory willingness tend to neglect larger societal implications of class and perpetuation of stratification. Lewis, for example, goes as far as to speculate that the debutante ball today is about social reproduction, but she never fully explores the insider perspective of parents or delves into questions about social, cultural, and economic capital (Lewis 9). Vida describes the debutante events as an opportunity for parents to show off their children in front of other elite families and reaffirm social connections, but her work lacks a substantial discussion of what a debutante gains from making her debut and why exactly, from a sociological standpoint, parents would want such a particular experience for their daughter (Vida 59, 71). Harrison focuses on adolescent fantasy as the primary explanation of individual women's decision to participate in the debutante ball, but neglects the importance of family connections and the hereditary nature of social, cultural, and economic capital in the process. Kendall, on the other hand, focuses primarily on social reproduction within the

debutante ball, and only mentions women's rewards and motivations as an aside. Her findings on the class reproduction are quite telling.

Before exploring Kendall's work, though, it is necessary to expand on foundational concepts that are brought to life and drawn upon in her findings: Pierre Bourdieu's theory of how capital, in its economic, cultural, and social forms, functions in our society. Capital, as described by Bourdieu, is essentially like having different types of tools that enable an individual or group to better "play the game" of navigating society. Because not everyone has the same tools, the game is not one of chance, but rather is one of unequal opportunity (Bourdieu 81). Whereas we usually think of societal advantages as just being economic, Bourdieu contends that social and cultural capital also thrive in society among certain "players" (81). All types of capital may be passed down through families, as capital tends to be privatized—only owned by some, and therefore heavily protected and maintained within families (81). Economic capital can be displayed in terms of material goods and can also signify cultural and social capital (81). Cultural capital has to do largely with education—what you know about how to behave in society (82). Bourdieu points out that family acts as a major site of acquiring cultural capital, as parents teach their children the cultural ropes of how to belong to a certain class (84). Social capital has to do with connections—who you know in society and what types of titles those connections confer onto you (82). Both cultural and social capital can be converted into economic capital, according to Bourdieu, and such is certainly the case within debutante culture, where social connections provide invitations to a space to show off cultural capital, and give families an opportunity to accumulate and display material goods, such as expensive dresses and lavish jewelry (82).

Kendall brings in a discussion of the reproduction of these forms of capital when she focuses her reports of debutante observations on how the women are presented in connection

with their families—a crucial component to the ritual. She pays close attention to how a debutante is always announced by declaring who her parents are, and she cites this as evidence that one of the main functions of a debutante ball is to display a social sign of parents' accomplishments (Kendall 1). She is also interested in the exclusive nature of debutante balls, and contends that exclusive rituals such as the debutante ball exist so that group members can reaffirm their own social status while simultaneously discouraging the upward mobility of other classes (2). Thus it makes sense that parents would want to pass down such class membership to their own children, rather than leaving room for children of other, lower-class families to gain the same previously-held advantages. Indeed, Kendall says, participation in the debutante ball is a key way that parents pass down their social and cultural capital to their children—an incentive for participation that more likely would take the form of emotional appeals to carry on tradition (113, 115). She further points to how tradition upholds class stratification by saying that each person's participation in the debutante ball is seen as protecting the overall integrity of the group (115). She does not explore, however, how debutantes conceptualize or perceive their participation in the ritual as it pertains to their elite group membership.

Similar to Kendall, two other works, “Socialization to Elitism: A Study of Debutantes” by Dean D. Knudsen and “This Débutante ‘Business’” By Alida K. L. Milliken, likewise show the vested interest parents have in ensuring that their children make it to the debutante realm, connecting this desire for participation to the types of capital about which Bourdieu speaks. In Knudsen's piece, he notes that passing on elitism to children starts at an early age, and more likely takes the form of a process of socialization over time, rather than a stark, sudden event (Knudsen 300, 302). He recognizes, though, that the debutante ball is a special event for these families, because it signifies the accomplishment of this socialization process and the readiness

of children to become their own elite members (301). He contends that, alongside status recognition, marriage into one of these other elite families is a main function of the debutante ball, as intermarriage helps maintain the boundaries of the upper class (301). In this way, peer approval is crucial to these families, and the debutantes themselves, he found, are more likely than non-debutante women to perceive that their family has social prestige (308, 304). Thus Knudsen would argue that the debutante ball has more to do with social, rather than economic and cultural, capital, as the main purpose of the ritual is to distinguish families for their social elitism and to maintain connections. His article does nothing, however, in evaluating the degree of daughter's willingness or resistance to be a part of this socialization process as seen in their participation in the debutante ball.

Milliken, on the other hand, is concerned with the economic capital aspect of the debutante ball. Writing in the 1930s, Milliken takes note of how overproduction has led to a push for overconsumption, particularly targeted toward children. Therefore, she contends, children grow up learning about what is important in life through acts of consumption (Milliken 136). Parents of these children likewise buy into this ideology of consumption, but more so through the pressure to be included among, for example, circles of mothers who are putting on the most lavish parties for their children (137). Milliken distinguishes the debutante ball as the pentacle of such economic consumption for social ends, as she describes how tradition and capitalism coincide in the debutante ball to essentially sell exclusivity (138). The debutante ball is therefore a commodity, but one that is recognized as "legitimate" and "proper," enticing parents to have their children participate and enticing children to soak up the privilege of consuming such lavish goods (137). Thus Milliken's work focuses on the economic capital that is consumed and displayed through the debutante process, and how this display sets families apart in a socially

exclusive manner. Similar to Knudsen, Milliken also neglects the insider perceptions of debutantes, opting to generalize from observations rather than conducting interviews with participants in order to better speak on their perspectives.

The idea that certain families seek to distinguish themselves from other families is a recurring theme in the debutante ball. Based on the literature, it seems important to families that their children receive the same social, economic, and cultural rewards that they have held, but this comes at the expense of keeping other families out. Kendall speaks to this phenomenon in her piece “Class in the United States: Not Only Alive, But Reproducing,” in which she takes a broader look at how class divisions survive in America. She points out that a primary way that class stratification is maintained is by the passing down of privilege from parents to children—a goal that is clearly observed in the debutante process (Kendall 89). Kendall draws on Bourdieu’s work when she says that the type of class capital that parents pass onto their children is not just economic, but also social and cultural (89). Therefore even “financially independent” children of upper class parents enter society as adults with certain advantages that children from other families lack. Kendall also pushes against the idea that economic classes are grouped only by common financial standing and not by any meaningful experiences, countering that class stratification depends on the shared social experiences within the “haves” and the “have-nots”—for example, the experience of the debutante ball (90).

Motivating theories on the normalization of social boundaries

These types of experiences that work to keep groups together within themselves while divided from one another are discussed in Michéle Lamont and Virág Molnár’s work “The Study of Boundaries in Social Sciences.” Lamont and Molnár explain that boundaries have been crucially present across all types of cultures, and should therefore be of monumental interest to

sociologists (Lamont and Molnár 167). The key to maintaining these boundaries across cultures, they claim, is the practice of symbols and rituals. The authors go on to differentiate between two types of boundaries: symbolic and social (168). *Symbolic boundaries* are created by social actors who seek to bring *social boundaries*—socially constructed differences between groups of people that equate to unequal advantages—into focus so that the actors may see group differences as legitimate realities (168, 169). Symbolic boundaries often take the form of ritual traditions (such as the debutante ball), and such traditions work to not only construct identification with other group members, but also to contrast the group as a whole with non-participating outsiders (171). Thus these ritual traditions, reenacted and performed time after time, become a way of legitimizing the class and culture of the dominant group in comparison to the class and culture of less dominant, outsider groups. In order to maintain group identity, the class and culture of the dominant group is successfully passed down through families (172).

Such an explanation of rituals and traditions as symbolic boundaries also echo the work of Dennis Rook, who discusses how rituals are “expressive, symbolic...repeated over time...[and] scripted and acted out” (Rook 252). He contends that rituals have four distinct parts: ritual artifacts, ritual scripts, ritual performances, and ritual audiences—all of which are present in the debutante ball (253). The presence of all of these factors can take on several functions, one of which is to keep a society or community together under a shared meaning or experience—keeping insiders in and outsiders out (255). Rook’s work, however, does not primarily focus on this function of rituals, and therefore he does not explore this purpose in-depth.

The previously discussed articles—addressing degrees of willingness, possibilities of choice, familial pressure, traditions, capital, and class reproduction—have all been vastly helpful to me in shaping my research question. None of the articles, however, offer a comprehensive

look at how debutantes, parents, and other participants understand their own participation in the debutante ball in terms of how it contributes to the reproduction of class, reaping of capital rewards, and maintenance of social boundaries. None of the works devoted space to what processes lead young debutante women to either perceive or not perceive their social position as exemplary of a stratified society, or how debutante-insiders rationalize their participation in such a social event. Addressing these gaps in the literature is the goal of my work on the North Carolina debutante ball, so that I can examine the possibilities for the continuation of the ritual.

Methods

Data and participants

Because I was interested in learning about individuals' experiences with and perspectives on the ritual of debutante culture, it benefited my research most to collect qualitative data via semi-structured interviews face-to-face and over the phone. I was only partially interested in collecting facts about how the debutante system works (e.g. who within the Terpsichorean Club decides to whom invitations are sent); more than anything, I wanted to hear about how the debutante participants themselves interpret and conceptualize the culture surrounding the debutante ball. For this reason, I conducted twenty-two semi-structured in-depth interviews to gain an understanding of insider perspectives on the debutante ball. In order to gain access to a well-rounded sample of insiders, I expand the definition of "participants" to include not only past debutantes, but also prospective debutantes (those who received an invitation but not did not participate), family members, assistant marshals (debutantes' dates for the presentation weekend), and Terpsichorean Club members.

Ultimately, I interviewed fifteen participating debutantes, one prospective debutante, five family members (one parent of a prospective debutante, three parents of participating debutantes,

and one sibling of a participating debutante), two assistant marshals, and one Terpsichorean Club member. It is important to note, however, that several participants have dual roles in the data set (e.g. a participant could be both a parent and a past debutante), so the frequency of participants occupying various roles in debutante culture outnumbers the actual count of interviews.

Seventeen research participants were women and five research participants were men. Ages of research participants range from eighteen to eighty-seven, thus displaying the cross-generational function of the debutante ritual. Before each interview, I read a verbal consent form to participants, in accordance with IRB protocol, to gain participants' voluntary consent. In the form, I explained to participants the focus of the research study. I assured them that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. I furthermore explained to participants that the interview would take the form of a semi-structured discussion of questions from an interview guide, and that their responses would be audio recorded unless they otherwise asked me to refrain from recording. After obtaining each interviewee's consent, I signed and dated the printed form, to show that I had verbal confirmation of their consent. Such a verbal, rather than written, consent form enabled me to conduct interviews over the phone, rather than exclusively in person.

Because I wanted to collect a range of diverse perspectives and evaluate what, exactly, causes those perspectives to become different from one another, I sought out sixteen prospective debutantes for research participation. One of these had, upon receiving her invitation to make her debut, declined the request, while the other fifteen had accepted their invitations and gone on to participate in the debutante ball. Although my research question primarily focuses on modern-day rationalizations for participation, I felt that my research would be enhanced by including participants who made their debut in decades prior to the 2010s. This way, I could better learn

whether or not, and if so, how, the conception and purpose of the debutante ball has changed throughout time for debutantes themselves (i.e. excluding non-debutante family members, marshals, and Terpsichorean members who attended before the 2010s.) Therefore, I interviewed two women who made their debuts in the 1900s—one who her debut in the 1940s and one who made her debut in the 1970s. The remaining thirteen participating debutantes all made their debut in the 2010s.

Beyond debutantes themselves, though, I was eager to get more of an outside-insider perspective from participants who have attended the debutante ball and/or have actively contributed to debutante culture, but were not, themselves, debutantes. Therefore I interviewed five family members (four parents and one sibling), two assistant marshals, and one Terpsichorean Club member. This sampling gave me insight not only as to non-debutante perspectives, but also as to how rationalizations for and perceptions of the debutante ball have changed over time. For example, one family member attended the ball in the 1950s and 1970s; additionally, the one Terpsichorean Club member attended the ball in the 1980s during his college days and ever since as a former Terpsichorean member. Thus I ensured that, not only did I not have a strictly debutante-centric group of research participants, but I also did not exclusively focus on the 2010s as a time of examination. This enabled my research to stay away from becoming a case study of one particular debutante-insider demographic at one particular time, and instead allowed me to answer questions about debutantes today by utilizing rich data from multiple perspectives across multiple decades. See Table 1 for research participant descriptions.

Table 1: Research Participant Demographics. Total of twenty-two interviews.

NAME (PSEUDONYMS)	ROLE	DECADE OF PARTICIPATION
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Natalie	Debutante; Mother of prospective debutante	1970s; 2000s
Allie	Debutante Leader	2010s
Lauren	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s
Meredith	Debutante	2010s
Emily	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s
Catherine	Debutante	2010s
Emma	Debutante	2010s
Summer	Debutante	2010s
Molly	Debutante	2010s
Hillary	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s
Beth	Debutante	2010s
Megan	Debutante	2010s
Hannah	Debutante	2010s
Sophie	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s
Elaine	Debutante	1940s
Kelsey	Prospective Debutante	2010s
Amanda	Mother of debutantes	2000s; 2010s
Gordon	Terpsichorean Club member; Father of debutante	1980s; 2010s
Alex	Assistant Marshal	2010s
Henry	Assistant Marshal	2010s
Nate	Brother of debutante	2000s
Arthur	Brother of debutante; Assistant marshal; Father of debutante; Grandfather of debutantes	1950s; 1970s, 2000s; 2010s

Data collection

Recruitment process

Because I needed my interviews to be reflective of the overall experience of having been involved in debutante culture, I employed purposive sampling: I approached participants to suggest their contribution to my research, rather than participants approaching me. The only criteria of this sampling were that the participant was qualified either as a prospective debutante; a participating debutante; a family member of a prospective debutante or a participating debutante; an assistant marshal; or a Terpsichorean Club member. Six interviews were conducted over the phone, while the remaining sixteen interviews were conducted face-to-face.

Thanks to my own status as a debutante-culture insider, I did not encounter the problem of having too few interview subject options. Rather, my primary challenge was to avoid focusing on my own family and my own hometown. However, these connections certainly served me well in recruiting research participants. Initially, I made contact with family members and friends who had made their debut in the past, explaining my research project and asking if they would consider helping me in any way, whether it was through talking with me themselves or putting me in touch with others they felt would contribute nicely to my research. Once I had individuals in mind to recruit for research—whether from my own knowledge that they were debutante insiders or from the suggestions of others (i.e. snowball sampling)—I would reach out to these individuals through either email or Facebook message, using a template for recruitment that included the information about the project, as well as a guarantee that participants' names and hometowns would be kept anonymous and replaced with pseudonyms.

Often friends and family members, in suggesting research participants, might say, “you should really talk with so-and-so, because she was really into it” or “she hated it, so she would definitely work well with your project.” Similarly, several potential research subjects that I approached for participation offered their willingness to help, but warned me that they felt that they would not have helpful contributions to my research. Often, such warnings would take the form of “I just really didn't care about it that much” or “I only did it for my family, so I don't know anything about it as a larger organization.” Revealed in such qualifications for participation seemed to me an assumption that I was looking for a particular experience or knowledge-set on the debutante ball. Furthermore, these warnings showed me that such participants felt that their voice on the matter was not important in the bigger picture of debutante culture. In these times, I explained to people that I was not seeking out a certain

perspective: I was interested in talking with anyone who has had experience with the North Carolina debutante ball. As long as they were eighteen or older and willing, I was thrilled to speak with them. I therefore started framing my project in these terms when I reached out to people: “The great thing about Sociology is that I don't have to go into my research with a theory or hypothesis that I'm obligated to prove—I get to just hear people's stories, keep an open mind, and compile what I find into a paper in the end!” In this way, I tried to reassure people that I was interested in simply hearing their perspectives, whatever those perspectives may be, so that I could keep the data collection as objective as possible.

Obstacles to data collection

During the recruitment process, I enjoyed a fair response rate, with only two prospective participants failing to respond to my outreach. One of these women had, in fact, declined her invitation to debut. Though I had never met her, we both knew another participant in my study, so I used said participant as a link in an attempt to gain the prospective participant's trust. However, I never heard back from this woman, causing me to wonder if this had anything to do with her status as a declining debutante. Indeed, finding prospective debutantes who had declined their offer to participate was one of my biggest challenges in the recruitment process. At the end of each interview, I would ask participants for suggestions on whom to interview next, always stressing that I needed to find someone who had declined their invitation. In almost every interview, the participant said they felt like they knew someone who had decided to not debut, but they could not remember who. One past deb explained that she could not remember those who declined their invitations, because if they were not there, she did not associate them with the process—they were, in a sense, out of sight, out of mind. Eventually one research participant suggested a friend that we both knew, and I was able to interview her to gain the declining

perspective. I was, however, hesitant to reach out to her, because it seemed a delicate question to ask whether or not she had been invited to debut. What if my other research participant was wrong? What if she actually had not been invited? What if I made her feel embarrassed? What if my asking hurt her feelings? The fact that I experienced these anxieties reinforced in my mind the sensitive nature of the debutante ball, as it holds loaded social significance of who is deemed worthy by a certain (high class) social circle to receive an invitation in the first place.

The other prospective participant who failed to respond to my outreach was a distant acquaintance. I knew that the debutante tradition was important in her family, and I had been encouraged by others to reach out to her. Thus it puzzled me when she ignored my message asking for her to consider contributing to my research. However, this disappointment became more clearly explained when I was speaking with a parent of a debutante who knows this same family. Though she did not mention this family, I wondered if they might fall under the description she was offering. She told me that some families might be hesitant to contribute to my research, out of an assumption that any sociological paper on the debutante ball will be critical. Understandably, she noted, such families would not like to feel that they enabled the production of a piece that has anything negative to say about a tradition that they hold dear. She compared such a paper to investigative journalism, and suggested that prospective participants could fear that I am going into the project with an agenda to prove that the debutante ball is no longer relevant to society and should be abolished. She clarified that, after participating in an interview for my project, she did not think this was what I was doing in my research. However, she advised that I assure prospective participants during the recruitment process that I would not use participants' actual names and that I would not be attacking the ritual in my eventual paper.

This participant's hypothesis concerning insider anxiety was brought to life in my research in the form of a participant whose interview I eventually had to take out of my project. This past debutante showed more concern over a paper being written on the debutante ball than I had ever imagined I would encounter. Of course, I had read from authors such as Cynthia Lewis how difficult it could be to penetrate the world of deb culture and achieve access to honest interviews. I had thought, however, that my own status as a debutante insider would eliminate this problem for me altogether. Yet this interviewee showed signs of concern from the onset of communication, as she asked me to send her my interview questions in advance. She was intent to meet in person, rather than to speak over the phone, yet when we sat down together, she seemed torn between wanting to gush about her days as a debutante and wanting to not say a word. Rather than asking whether or not I would use her name—as the Terpsichorean Club member I interviewed did—she stated, first thing, that I was not permitted by her to use her name. I assured her that, even if she wanted me to use her name, I could not, due to the IRB protocol I was bound to follow. She did not seem convinced, however, and repeated herself several times on this matter throughout our interview. Furthermore, after I explained my research question in terms of motivation of participants and significance to insiders, she asked me if I was going to let her read my paper. I told her she was welcomed to read my research. She looked at me, straight-faced, and said, "I'm going to read it. If I help you with this, I have the right to read it." In contrast to other participants who had shown upbeat interest in my findings, this participant's declaration of interest seemed more like a threat than a "good luck" wish. Throughout our interview, she often mumbled, shook her head, and told me she did not like a certain question, such as "what does the debutante ball mean in society today?" Furthermore, she was the only participant who asked that I stop recording at a certain point, even though I had

offered the same option to all other research participants. The next day, she got in touch with me to ask me what I planned to title my paper.

Driving away from our interview, I recorded myself verbally processing through what I had just heard and experienced. For the first time, I feared the personal costs of writing a paper that could potentially disappoint, offend, or enrage the people in my own social circle. Sensing that this interviewee felt discomfort during the interview despite consenting to participate in the study, I followed up with her over email and explained my project more fully. I stood by the fact that I was not going into the project with an agenda to attack the debutante ball, but stated that, from a sociological perspective, I needed to be critical, and so my paper would likely not result in blind praise for the tradition. I reinforced that her participation in this study was completely voluntary and asked her if she still gave consent to use material gained from our interview. After thinking about it for nearly a week, she asked me to delete her interview and carry on with my paper without her contribution. Thus although I conducted twenty-three interviews, I only include twenty-two in this analysis, and none of the results presented were gained with the help of this interviewee. Nevertheless, the fact that an interview needed to be cut due to reasons of insider concern about potential criticism of the ritual does beg the question: why are these participants so enthusiastic about the debutante ball if they know that such capacity for criticism exists?

Questions asked

In interviewing all debutantes—participating as well as nonparticipating—I asked questions such as when the respondent first learned about debutante culture; how she felt when she received her invitation; and what decision-making processes she went through in accepting or rejecting her invitation. Additionally, I developed a typology for degrees of willingness of

participation that included four categories: enthusiastic participation, meaning that a debutante had strong feelings of excitement for her participation; ambivalent participation, meaning that a debutante did not have strong feelings one way or another concerning her participation; resistant participation, meaning that a debutante had strong feelings against her participation; and declining participation, meaning that a prospective debutante did not participate, despite receiving an invitation. I explained each category to debutante participants and asked them if one of the four categories accurately described their degree of willingness to participate and why. I asked all participating debs and the one nonparticipating deb to describe their family's connections to debutante culture, what the process means to their family, what their understanding is of the stereotypes surrounding debutante culture, what they think the debutante ball means to larger society, how they feel their identity does or does not align with debutante culture, what they feel the gains are of making one's debut, and how they would explain the purpose of the debutante ball to someone who had never heard of the ritual.

In interviewing participants who attended in previous decades, such as past debutantes, family members, or Terpsichorean members, I asked about how the ball has changed over the years, in organization, procedure, and meaning. When interviewing parents, I asked about their family's decision-making process as to whether or not to participate in the ritual, and asked if it was important to them that their daughter make her debut and why. To these parents, as well as to other family members, such as brothers, I asked what it was like to attend the ball as a non-debutante participant. During the interview with the one Terpsichorean Club member I spoke with, I asked about the process of putting on the debutante ball, including how participants are chosen, how Terpsichorean members are chosen, and what the club does with the revenue from

the ball. With all research subjects, though, the discussion was primarily motivated by questions of rationalization of participation and overall significance and purpose of the debutante ball.

Upon the completion of several of the interviews, participants asked me for my own opinion on the ball. Such participants often commented on the unbiased nature of my questions and told me that they could not tell based on the interview how I felt about the ritual. This reaffirmed my hopes that my data would be rich and unbiased, as I surmised that participants did not feel pressured to say one thing or another. Furthermore, many participants admitted to processing these things for the first time during our interview, commenting “I’d never thought of that” after various questions. Indeed, many debts seemed to change their tune from the start of the interview to the end of it, developing a bit more of a critical and questioning view of the debutante ball. It seemed that the mere act of bringing up questions of meaning and purpose surrounding the deb ball was novel enough to participants that it gave them a space for reflection on the issue for the first time. Many such participants told me that they were glad to have talked to me and to have finally thought through their participation. Although I expected interviews to last about forty-five minutes, interviews lasted an average of one hour and ten minutes.

Data analysis method

Because my interviews ended up being so substantial in length of time, I found it most practical for my project to transcribe selectively, rather than typing full transcriptions of each interview. In this way, I took thorough notes on each interview’s audio recording, and also transcribed word-for-word several blocks of quotes that succinctly articulated an interviewee’s experiences or perspectives. After transcribing all twenty-two interviews in this manner, I had more than two hundred and fifty pages of data. To analyze the qualitative data I had gathered, I read through interviews and took notes on emerging codes that I had noticed during the transcribing process. These codes were divided into three major themes, or questions: 1) why did

the research subjects participate in debutante culture? 2) how do they talk about their experience? and 3) how do they talk about debutante culture as a whole?

The following codes were included under the theme of participant motivations: social factors, status factors, financial factors, family connections, degrees of willingness, presence of choice, family pressure, and decision-making process. The following codes were included under the theme of participant experience: fun, identity and belonging, reconciling negative stereotypes, interactions with outsiders, interactions with insiders, distancing, role of alcohol, discomfort within the interview, gains from participation, presentation ceremony, meaning to families, memory, and processing within the interview. The following codes were included under the theme of participant perception of debutante culture as a whole: stereotypes, display of wealth, criteria for invitations, race, gender, age, region, tradition, effects of the ball on larger society, purpose of the ball, Terpsichorean Club, and factors that enable continuation. I thoroughly analyzed all twenty-two interviews using the thirty-three codes, taking notes on how each interview spoke to each code. After going through this process, I was able to confidently connect the dots and construct the overall narrative of analysis that is presented in my results section.

Results

After analyzing all twenty-two interviews, I was able to observe a larger picture of what motivates the continuation of the debutante ball. Initially, I had assumed that participation of debutantes was the primary driving factor of the ritual, and furthermore assumed that participation was largely determined by debutantes themselves. Thus I anticipated that my results would allow me to draw comparisons between debutantes as individuals: their extracurricular activities, their political ideologies, their hometown region within North Carolina, etc. However,

I found that differences between debs as individuals—aspects of their identity that make them unique—do not play a large role in the debutante decision. Indeed, I found this to be a recurring theme of debutante participation: the individuality of participating women is stripped away through the debutante process, as choice to participate is complicated and the group of debutantes is intentionally homogenized through the ritual.

For example, out of the fifteen participating debutantes that I interviewed, fourteen expressed discomfort with some area of the debutante process. In this way, I found that debutantes often sacrifice something of their own comfort to debut. This “decision” to sacrifice was consistently based on one or more of three factors: the desire to please family, the prospect of social inclusion (i.e. knowing other friends who are also debuting), and the appeal of fun, parties, and dressing up. Because debutantes see one or more of these three factors as potential gains from participation, they concede something of their own preference for the debutante process. For all of the fourteen debutantes who displayed discomfort, this uneasiness stemmed, at least in part, from being put on display at the presentation ceremony. For debutantes who felt enthusiastic about their participation, this was the only type of discomfort expressed in the interviews. For debutantes who were on the spectrum from ambivalent to resisting, however, this discomfort often involved sacrificing aspects of their own self-identity and/or principles (e.g. opposing sexism, racism, or material excess in the event.) The fact that fourteen out of fifteen participating debutantes would acquiesce to the ritual despite personal preferences or beliefs, based on potential gains in the areas of family, friends, and fun, shines light on what causes the debutante ball to remain a largely unquestioned institution by insiders: the pairing of both consent (favoring potential gains) and coercion (giving up individual comfort). This phenomenon constitutes the debutante ritual as a hegemonic process, where participants feel they cannot

oppose the areas that bring discomfort because an illusion of free will has been created (Bennett 192). In the case of the debutante ball, I found that this hegemony, in all its work to strip participating women of their individuality, functions to create a homogenous group of women—particularly at the presentation ceremony—who essentially become objects to display their own family's wealth in social, economic, and cultural capital via the debutante ritual.

In the following sections, I will explain the process of consent and coercion at work in the debutante process more clearly, beginning with an exploration of the concept of “choice.” I will display, using qualitative data from interviews with debutantes and non-debutante insiders, why choice is hard to measure in the case of debutante participation: sometimes choice does not exist, and at best it is nuanced by pressure from family. I will then discuss what debutantes give up over the course of their participation, beginning with the discomforts of the presentation ceremony and then moving towards the often less-apparent sacrifices of personal identity and/or principles. I will demonstrate the commonly intersecting factors of family, friends, and fun that function to persuade debutantes to consent, keeping in mind prior discussions of why “consent” is problematic in this case. Subsequently, I bring to light the ways in which the consent and coercion of debdom create a hegemonic process, by demonstrating how participants struggle to rationalize their own position as debutante-insiders. Often, as I show, participants admit to not having thought before about the purpose of the debutante ball. Debutante insiders rationalize their place in the process by setting up contrasting purposes of debutante participation and distancing themselves from the explanation that they find less appealing, such as eligibility for marriage and procurement of elite status.

Lastly, I zoom out from debutante “decisions” and rationalizations and focus on larger issues of capital within certain families by addressing the question of why families and debutante

organizers want these women to participate in the first place. In this section, I bring back arguments of debutante de-individualization by discussing how the debutante ball is largely about families, rather than individual women. I then go on to explain what families have to gain through debutante participation, including display and accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital, which mark group belonging in an elite class. I then discuss how the debutante ball functions to concentrate this capital within certain families in North Carolina by demonstrating how the process works to connect the next elite generation and maintain exclusivity. In this way, the debutante ball both marks and reaffirms social, economic, and cultural success for participating families, which culminates in extravagant celebrations that both parents and children partake in as the children become adults with their own elite status. In short, I argue that participation has little to do with debutante women as actual people, and rather works to reaffirm and reproduce pre-existing social, economic, and cultural prestige of certain families in North Carolina.

Section 1: “Now who here among us still believes in choice? Not I.”

These lyrics from a favorite song of mine—“Ocean of Noise,” by Arcade Fire—kept tumbling through my mind the days preceding my debut. I was torn between feeling like I was responsible for my own participation and feeling like I had been coerced. I kept coming back to the understanding, though, that I simply did not have a choice to not participate in the first place. For me, declining my invitation, though technically offered by my parents as an option, was simply not available, as my two older sisters before me had participated and my parents had emphasized the sentimental familial value to their last daughter making her debut. My “consent” consequentially boiled down to fear of guilt. I was curious, then, going into this project, as to how other debutantes had ended up participating in the ritual, as well as how they felt about their

position as debutantes. Do they describe their participation in terms of enthusiasm, ambivalence, resistance, or declination? How do they understand their own options for either participating or not participating? How does pressure from others complicate choice for debutantes? This section, therefore, addresses questions of willingness, choice, and pressure, as it pertains to the participation of debutante women.

Degrees of willingness

In each semi-structured interview with participating debutantes, I described four categories of degrees of willingness for participation: enthusiastic, ambivalent, resistant, and declining. (Although clearly only the first three would apply to participating debutantes, and only the last category can be applied to the one prospective debutante I interviewed who chose not to participate.) Among the fifteen participating debutantes, I expected that there would be a fair degree of variety as to how debutantes would qualify their participation. I was surprised to find, however, that only four debutantes described themselves as fully enthusiastic, only three identified as fully ambivalent, and none described themselves as fully resistant. Although I did not explicitly offer spectrums from one category to the next as an option within interviews, eight debutantes described themselves using two categories—three of whom claimed to be between enthusiastic and ambivalent, and five of whom claimed to be between ambivalent and resistant. See Table 2 for debutante degrees of willingness and reasons identified for participation.

Table 2. Debutante degrees of willingness. Fifteen participating debutantes; one non-participating debutante.

NAME (PSEUDONYMS)	ROLE	DECADE OF PARTICIPATION	DEGREE OF WILLIGNESS	REASONS IDENTIFIED FOR PARTICIPATION
Emily	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s	Enthusiastic	Family, Friends, Fun
Summer	Head Debutante	2010s	Enthusiastic	Family, Friends, Fun

Megan	Debutante Leader	2010s	Enthusiastic	Family, Friends, Fun
Elaine	Debutante	1940s	Enthusiastic	Family, Friends
Hillary	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s	Enthusiastic/Ambivalent	Family, Friends, Fun
Hann	Debutante	2010s	Enthusiastic/Ambivalent	Family, Fun
Allie	Debutante Leader	2010s	Enthusiastic/Ambivalent	Family, Fun
Natalie	Debutante; Mother of declining debutante	1970s	Ambivalent	Family, Fun
Molly	Debutante	2010s	Ambivalent	Family, Friends, Fun
Lauren	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s	Ambivalent	Family, Friends, Fun
Beth	Debutante	2010s	Ambivalent/Resistant	Family
Meredi	Debutante	2010s	Ambivalent/Resistant	Family
Emma	Debutante	2010s	Ambivalent/Resistant	Family, Friends, Fun
Sophie	Sister of debutante; Debutante	2000s; 2010s	Ambivalent/Resistant	Family, Fun
Catherin	Debutante	2010s	Ambivalent/Resistant	Family
Kelsey	Prospective Debutante	2010s	Declining	Lack of family, friends, and fun

The data shows that, though most participating debutantes needed to use more than one category to describe their willingness for participation, other debutantes felt comfortable categorizing themselves as fully one of the four degrees. The only category that no debutante fully identified with, however, is “resistant.” Any debutante who used this category as a description of her participation also felt the need to partially identify as ambivalent. The qualitative data shows that this apprehension to claim full resistance came, often, not from a statement of personal partial acceptance to the debutante ball, but rather from limited possibilities for resistance in the first place. For several debutantes, this decision to not fully resist participation was explained in terms of costs versus benefits. For example, participant

Sophie explained: “It would have caused unnecessary problems if I had [resisted].” Similarly, participant Meredith explained that resisting participation would cause harm in her relationship with her father, which she was not willing to risk. After weighing the costs and benefits of participation, Meredith concluded: “So I don’t think it was really worth it to resist when it’s like, one weekend of my life.”

Implied in resistant/ambivalent debutantes’ reasons for not fully resisting participating is the pre-existing expectation of participation. This automatically situates prospective debutantes on the defense if they want to break away from expectations and decline their invitation. In other words, due to assumptions concerning participation, these debutantes are put in a place where, if they want to elect to not participate, they are already up against forces that constrain resistance.

This phenomenon is nicely demonstrated by participant Catherine, who, when asked to categorize her debutante participation as one of the four degrees of willingness, answered:

I would say somewhere between ambivalent and completely resistant, because I wouldn’t say that I was necessarily that intrigued by it. I kind of feel like before I was a deb I had enough knowledge to know that I wasn’t interested in it and to understand what it was, but at the same time I would say that I wasn’t completely resistant to it, mostly because [pause] I felt like the decision had already been made before it was asked of me.

Catherine’s answer demonstrates a crucial component that must be present if participation is to be talked about in terms of willingness at all: choice, meaning the free ability to say yes or no. Since autonomous choice is not present for some debutantes, the idea of willingness and consent is complicated, as they cannot adequately express their own agency for participating or not participating. As Table 2 shows, debutantes who identify as partially resistant are the only category of participants who only identify “family” as a reason for participation, showing that family pressures and expectations often play a role in the stripping away of women’s autonomous decision-making abilities concerning debutante participation.

Nonexistence of choice

It was kind of a thing where I wasn't physically forced to go, but [pause] I didn't really have a choice not to go [laughter.]—participant Sophie

In every interview, I asked research participants to walk me through their decision-making process as to whether or not they would participate as a debutante. For many participating debutantes I spoke with, their participation in the ball was not a decision that was reached through a process, but was rather something that was framed as expected, or already decided. Phrases such as “there was no question” appeared several times throughout the data, as debutantes communicated to me that there was not a decision-making process to be had about their participation.

For debutantes who identified along the spectrum from enthusiastic to ambivalent, the nonexistence of a decision-making process did not particularly bother them, due to their lack of strong feelings against the ball. For example, Lauren, who described herself as ambivalent, explained: “I don't remember feeling particularly excited or that I didn't want to do it. I just sort of always knew that I was going to do it, so I didn't think about it that much.” Similarly, enthusiastic participant Emily stated: “[Laughter] There was no decision. It wasn't like I didn't want to do it, it was just kind of something that I knew that I would eventually do when I got to nineteen years old or however old I was.” When I asked enthusiastic participant Summer—who was the head debutante the year of her debut—if she could walk me through her decision-making process, she replied: “No, it was pretty much like I was—I mean my parents probably would have let me think about it, but I think they definitely would have encouraged me to do it. It was kind of expected.” These interviews revealed that even for women who did not feel strongly against making their debut, or were even in favor of making their debut, participation was not something that they could fully affirm for themselves, because the decision had already been made, often due to pre-existing expectations from family members. Furthermore, these quotes

show that consideration of not participating—a process that would be required in the definition of “choice”—was not encouraged in these debutantes. Indeed, one parent I spoke with admitted that the possibility of declining an invitation to debut was not discussed with his children: “I think it was just always assumed that they would do that, so we really didn’t have a lot of [pause] conversation about it. [Pause] It was just assumed that they would do it, and it’s just part of a family tradition” (participant Gordon).

Debutantes who identified along the spectrum from ambivalent to resisting similarly described their choices as limited, although these debs were more likely than enthusiastic debs or fully ambivalent debs to be critical of this lack of choice. While critical of this absence of a decision-making process, these debs often affirmed, in one way or another, their ultimate position as debutantes. For some debs, this took the form of cost versus benefit analysis, in which their expression of willingness to participate involved weighing social gains versus social losses—an analysis that exemplifies a lack of total free will. For example, ambivalent/resistant debutante Meredith explained: “I never really said yes and my dad just kind of signed me up. And then I was like, ‘oh wait, you signed me up? Really?’ And I was just like, okay. I mean I was never really angry about it, cause I was just like, it’s not worth it, I’m just going to do it.” Similarly, ambivalent/resistant debutante Emma reconciled her feelings of lack of choice with her ultimate participation in a type of social cost versus social benefit analysis:

It wasn’t really a process. Like I guess I [pause] especially because it wasn’t a thing that happened when I received the invitation so much as it was like...a very gradual understanding that it would be a thing that I might probably do. And I’ve never really felt like I had like total [pause] like I could do whatever I wanted, because, I don’t know. Or I guess I decided to do it because I thought it would be more harm to not do it than to do it. And it’s not that it would be harmful, but I figured that I might as well, because, um [pause] God, I’m trying to think of why I did it. [Laughter]

These interviews show one reason why “choice” is difficult to measure in the case of the debutante ball: for many participants, choice does not exist. Debutantes across degrees of

willingness recognize an absence of a decision-making process, although the ways debutantes discuss this lack of autonomy varies with degrees of willingness. Generally, enthusiastic or fully ambivalent debutantes do not see this lack of choice as an issue, whereas ambivalent/resistant debutantes bemoan their lack of autonomy, but ultimately justify their participation in other terms.

Nuances of pressure

Despite recognizing that options for decision-making were limited, several ambivalent/enthusiastic debutantes claimed that, when it came down to it, they did, indeed, participate in the deb ball out of their own choice. For example, whereas participant Emma claimed, as featured in the quote above, that she “never really felt ... like I could do whatever I wanted,” she goes on her interview to tell me that “it was definitely a choice.” In her explanation, she describes deciding to give her family something that they wanted, and grapples over whether or not she would have felt guilty if she had denied them of the deb experience. Emma’s explanation of choice is a nice demonstration of another obstacle to measuring choice for debutantes: nuances of pressure. For example, several debutantes I spoke with described that their parents technically gave them free choice, yet nudged them in the direction of participation by appealing to family obligation and fear of regret. One father I spoke with, Arthur, explained why he urged his daughter to participate, even though he knew she did not want to:

I think we probably looked at it more on the line that, ‘hey, if you don’t do it, you might look back on it and say, oh, I wish I had done it.’ So I think we were more concerned that it would be something that she would regret she did not do than, say, putting pressure on her to do it. There’s so many times when people say, ‘oh, if I had just done so-and-so.’ But you can’t go back and get it.

Many debutantes I spoke with articulated fear that they would regret not participating for one reason or another. Often, this fear took the form of family continuation, as the rumor concerning invitations is that a family is cut off from future debutante invitations once a

prospective debutante declines. Indeed, the one declining deb I spoke with, Kelsey, told me that the possibility of her sister not receiving an invitation is the one reason why she can see herself regretting her declining decision in the future. Parents of interviewees often argued that their daughters should not be deciding for their future children whether or not they have the opportunity to participate. For example, Catherine explained this pressure from her mother as a contributing factor to her participation: “My mom said at one point, she was like, ‘[Name], you never know, what if you have a daughter who would love this kind of thing? And if you don’t do it that could potentially prohibit her from doing it.’ And I was like, ‘well, I can’t really speak to what my future daughter may or may not want ...’” Of course, however, this cycle of participation yields an absence of choice and an elimination of decision for all prospective debutantes, if every woman is warned of the future harms of not participating.

Another way that debutantes found the “choice” given them from their parents to be compromised was through guilt concerning grandparents. Several debs I spoke with talked about the possibility of their grandparents passing away soon, and emphasized the family gathering of the deb ball as a way to have special time with their grandparents. Several of these participants likened the deb ball to a wedding, claiming that, since they cannot be sure that their grandparents will be alive for their wedding, it was nice to have everyone together and all dressed up for the debutante ball. This focus on family time and on (close-to-death) grandparents seemed to emotionally manipulate debutantes into participating. For example, Emma described this type of pressure during our interview: “[Mom] would just be like, ‘I think it would mean a lot to [grandmother],’ like she says that a lot. Which is just like, gosh, f***, like what do you want me to say to that?”

In my interview with participant Molly, I came to better understand the nuances of pressure that debutantes face in decision-making processes:

[Mom] is like, 'I'm not going to make you do it,' she's like 'I would encourage you to, this is one of those things that's not going to happen again, this is your one chance to do it, I think it will be a lot of fun for you,' she tried to talk me into it but she was also understanding, she was like 'I'm not going to make you do this, I understand if you really don't want to, I'm not going to do that to you.' She said 'this should be something that you want to do' but she also kind of made me feel bad because she was like 'I don't want you to regret not doing it.' So, but I wouldn't have, I maybe would have felt a little guilty if I hadn't have done it...

Here Molly displays how parental pressure can carry mixed messages: on the one hand, her mother wanted her debut to be her own decision, but on the other hand, her mother heavily interfered with this process, instilling fear of regret. Indeed, in the very course of attempting to give her daughter "choice" and denying the existence of any pressure, this mother made her daughter "feel bad," which ultimately led to Molly's "decision" to participate.

More than one debutante who identified as enthusiastic admitted, after thinking about it more, that there was pressure from their families to participate. However, they rationalized this by saying that they did not feel the pressure at the time, because participation was in line with their own identity. For example, enthusiastic participant Emily explained: "From my family there was really no pressure either way, it was just—it's not like it was something, well it was something expected, but I didn't feel the pressure of that. In my head I've just kind of always known, 'okay, I'm going to do this, this is a thing that my family has done for however many years, next year this is going to happen.'" When I asked Emily how her parents would have reacted if she had resisted her invitation to debut, she struggled to put herself in that position: "I honestly can't even really imagine [pause] what [mom] would have done, had I not done it. So yeah, that's kind of hard to think about. I think, had I been really skeptical about the whole thing, I think there would have been a lot of pressure, now that I'm thinking about it, from my whole family probably." Here, Emily demonstrates an important concept in evaluating pressure and

choice: only debs who feel at all opposed to their debut feel pressure from their families, because to feel pressure necessarily requires at least a degree of resistance. Therefore, to say that only ambivalent or partially resistant debs felt pressure, and to say that enthusiastic debs debuted totally out of their own choice, misunderstands the nuances of choice and the prevalence of pressure surrounding deb culture. Indeed, it appeared that familial pressure occurred for the vast majority of debutantes I interviewed—a force that certainly complicates the notion of “choice,” no matter the self-proclaimed degree of willingness for debutante participants.

In this section on “choice,” I have argued that, although some interviewees were comfortable using only one of the four categories of willingness to describe their participation, most debs found that they needed more than one category to describe their experience, and none of these debs found that they could totally identify themselves as resistant. This is because options for resistance were simply not open to the women, as often little to no discussion or thought took place as to whether or not they would debut, based on prior expectations, often from family members. Indeed, even when family members did open up conversation about participation, this “choice” was often accompanied by a nuanced form of pressure, utilizing fear of regret and family disappointment. How, then, can we, in full confidence, measure how much debs truly choose to participate in the debutante ball when they themselves are conflicted over their own degrees of willingness? I have started my presentation of findings with a demonstration of the complication of “choice” to show that the continuation of the debutante ball depends not so much on individual women and their preferences and identities as it does on the constraining of these women’s free choices by forces that will be explained in later sections. Thus although I argue that the debutante ball is a hegemonic institution requiring both consent and coercion, the very definition of “consent” has been problematized for potential debs before

these women even reach a point of “deciding” if they will accept their position in debutante hegemony. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that this power structure depends more on the illusion of “consent” than it does on the actual practice of it.

Section 2: Coercion: what debutantes give up

The question of “choice” is only relevant because of the potential losses in making one’s debut—if debutante participation only presented gains, external forces, such as parents, would have no reason to employ tactics of pressure. However, in making their debut, fourteen out of the fifteen debutantes I spoke with discussed having to give in to elements of the process that made them uncomfortable, in order to gain satisfaction in one or more areas of: pleasing family, spending time with friends, and having fun. In the following section, I explore what debutantes perceive to have sacrificed through their position in debutante culture. The facts of the debutante participation process, I argue, necessarily limit women’s opportunities to display their individuality. As I show, the perceptions of these losses differ, depending on degrees of willingness for participation, with enthusiastic debs mostly expressing unhappiness about the presentation ceremony and ambivalent and partially resistant debs lamenting, in addition to the presentation ceremony, sacrifices of personal identity and/or principles.

Discomforts during the presentation ceremony

R: I had always wanted to do [the debutante ball] and had never even considered not doing it. I mean there were definitely parts that were a little bit of a drag, but I was pretty enthusiastic, I feel like.

I: Which parts did you feel like were a drag?

R: Just like the deb ball in general, it’s not really a drag, it’s just like—even though it’s the main part—it’s like, pretty boring. And I sat there the whole time, and my neck—cause I was sitting off to the side, not really off to the side, but people were coming from the side the whole time, so I was turned looking at the girls, cause I had to be engaged, I guess. So my neck—I would have to like, take a break and look at the dads [laughter].— participant Summer, head debutante of her year

As participant Summer exemplifies in the quote above, the presentation ceremony was often described by debs—enthusiastic, ambivalent, and partially resistant alike—as a physically

and/or emotionally uncomfortable experience. The presentation ceremony, however, is widely regarded as the culmination of the debutante process, as all women have their moment—lasting about fifteen seconds each—to walk across stage, meet their chief marshal, step forward for applause and a photograph, and find their seat on stage. This is the event that many debutantes I spoke with discussed when I asked them about their image of the typical debutante or about their own distinct memory as debs. The long, white dress—often referred to sarcastically by participants as a “wedding dress”—is bought and worn for this occasion, and each woman holds a bouquet of ripe, red roses. The debutantes are presented alphabetically, and each debutante is announced first by her own name, and then by her parents’ (or rather her father’s) name. For example, the announcer declared upon my presentation, “Miss Anna Holliday Ormond, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Lyman Ormond III. She is presented by her father.” With often more than two hundred debutantes to be presented, the presentation ceremony can last over two hours. The head debutante starts both the procession and the recession, sitting on stage for the entire presentation. Debutantes with last names further along in the alphabet do not have an easier time even though they come on stage later, however. Waiting debutantes move along in line for hours before coming on stage themselves. At the end of the ceremony, all debutantes are asked to stand, and the announcer officially declares the women to be that year’s class of debutantes.

Since the presentation ceremony is upheld as the picturesque epitome of the debutante experience, I was surprised to learn from the data that this was the aspect of the whole experience about which nearly every single debutante participant had something negative to say. Sometimes, as Summer demonstrated, this discomfort was physical. Multiple debutantes, across degrees of willingness, mentioned the physical tolls of sitting up straight, maintaining a smile (while not laughing), and keeping silent. One interviewee described to me the pain of her lips

going dry, and how she had to fight the urge to lick her lips—something that she felt was inappropriate for the presentation, and was consequentially self-conscious about. Indeed, because the presentation is an aesthetic event, with such emphasis on the attire, flowers, music, and lighting, debutantes expressed concern for appearing well-presented and put-together, while simultaneously maintaining their own physical comfort for two and a half hours—a concern that the presentation ceremony does not take into consideration. As one enthusiastic deb put it, “I think that no one wants to sit in a chair for two and half hours or however long it was” (participant Megan).

For debs who categorized their participation as enthusiastic, the presentation ceremony was the primary downside of participation they explicitly stated. Furthermore, the one debutante I spoke with who did not have anything negative to say about her own experience came closest to saying something negative during our discussion of the presentation ceremony. She described the moment as a “special feeling,” but then said she was not sure why she felt this way, because the individual presentation is so short and does not involve much action on the part of the debutante. Seemingly uncomfortable as she mentally processed during this part of the interview, she ended her comment with nervous laughter.

Debutantes who identified as ambivalent or partially resisting, however, had more critical things to say about the presentation ceremony, discussing not only physical discomforts, but emotional discomforts, as well. For example, ambivalent participant Molly found the prospect of walking across stage and being in the spotlight uncomfortable, especially as it seemed to her to make an outdated statement on women:

I guess for me it seemed silly, like the concept of being presented to society, I kind of struggled with that, I was like I don't really understand this, like this is [year], what is the point of this? And it just seemed like something that it's kind of crazy it's still being done. And I asked my mom about that. I was like, why are we still doing this? It's not the 1800s anymore, like this feels weird to be presented to society, it's a little bit like it puts me on the spot and makes me feel kind of weird too. Like I'm not an object, like I don't know, and I

guess I was also just nervous about it because I didn't really know what to expect and I was afraid I'd have to like, I don't know, act or look a certain way that was expected of young women...

Molly's description of the presentation ceremony also highlights how women are put on display and objectified through being presented, and how this feeling of objectification contributes to discomfort. Furthermore, Molly nicely articulates that the presentation ceremony is loaded with certain expectations for appearance and behavior that may not, in actuality, align with a deb's identity—another way in which the process works to homogenize the group of women. Similarly, ambivalent/resistant participant Emma emphasized that part of what made the presentation ceremony a negative experience for her was a feeling of objectification and commodification that accompanied the event:

I remember after the presenting, or while I was doing the presentation, I was like, awe-struck by how commercial it felt, like there was music—like it felt like a catalogue, like being inside a catalogue. And I didn't realize it was going to be like that and I didn't realize it was going to make me feel like, actually upset...

Participant Hannah, who identified as somewhere between enthusiastic and ambivalent, discussed the “boring” element of the presentation ceremony, and attributed this to the lack of attention given to each woman as an individual:

I think they could do something with the ceremony—I mean, it's a ceremony, so of course you've got to be careful with it, but it is a very boring ceremony. [Laughter] Like, I feel like they could do even—I would be more interested if there were some descriptions in addition to the names, like I know it would make it longer, but at least it'd make it more interesting. At least you'd feel like you get to know the girl a little bit better than just her name. That part kind of sucks.

Hannah's suggestion brings to light an important element of the presentation ceremony: individual women are given no distinction, but rather the group of debutantes accumulates, one white dress after another, until all debutantes are on stage and are presented as a group. But, as Hannah goes on in the interview to point out, because it is a traditional ceremony, there is only so much room for creativity and, as a result, individuality is limited.

Personal identity and principles

[Sister] told me of course she wanted to say no, but when your parents want so badly for you to do something, it's like, you just do it, you know, you just give up your principles for a little bit. Which is so weird to think about. I don't know.—Nate, brother of debutante

Though debutantes across degrees of willingness discussed the discomforts associated with the presentation ceremony, participants who identified as ambivalent or partially resistant also described sacrifices made in personal identity and principles. These interviewees, when asked how they felt when they received their invitation, answered that they were not fully enthusiastic, due to stereotypes about the ritual that contradicted their own self-concept. Indeed, time and again, debbs who identified as either ambivalent or partially resistant described to me a negative stereotype of deb culture, and then worked throughout the interview to distance themselves from this stereotype and justify why they participated despite the sacrifice of being associated with a negative stereotype. In this way, a majority of the debutantes I spoke with discussed compromising their own identity and principles in some capacity, in exchange for something else. Ambivalent participant Natalie displays this process nicely:

I think in the beginning, that...I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it, because I considered it snobby, because it was, you know, the rich, white girls that got to do it, and *I didn't see myself that way*. I...[pause] I had low self-esteem growing up anyway, and so I certainly didn't want people pointing me out. Um, but then I—I think [grandmother] and [aunt] are the ones that really wanted me to do it, um, [grandmother] being in the very first one to ever be held, and I think that had a big part on me doing it. So I decided that yes, I would do it. I felt it was something my family wanted me to do. (Emphasis added)

As Natalie describes here, the debutante ball did not align specifically with her own self-concept, but she prioritized her desire to please her family above her desire to self-determine her identity. Though Natalie made her debut in the 1970s, not a lot has changed in the forty or so years between her debut and those of other debutantes I spoke with who debuted in the 2010s regarding tension between debutantes' desired image of themselves and negative conception of the debutante ball. For example, ambivalent participant Lauren described this tension between not only what she felt members of her extended family wanted her to do, but also between the motivations of those family members and her own principles:

At some point in my life I got sort of embarrassed of the whole like... I don't know, I just sometimes feel like my family's—not my parents'—but my extended family's values are like...different from maybe what mine are, so I just don't want to brand myself as like, a debutante-sorority girl when I feel like I'm a lot more than that, hopefully.

Here, Lauren shows how some debutantes feel that their participation in the deb ball automatically assigns them a certain identity or values set that they themselves disagree with. Furthermore, her description of being “branded” and her hope that she is “a lot more than” that branded identity demonstrate anxiety over the homogenization that takes place through the debutante process, in which participating women are stripped of their individuality and assigned an over-simplified identity for the duration of the event. Indeed, evidence of resisting this assigned identity occurred throughout the data, as women struggled openly over placing themselves within this undesired identity. For example, ambivalent participant Allie told me: “It almost feels like I've been selected as some elite person, but I'm not that way, you know, that's not who I am, or that's not who I want to think that I am. Like pretentious I guess, [I was] worried about being perceived as pretentious.” Here, Allie demonstrates an understanding of a primary function of the debutante ball: to gather together the elite families from around the state. Like several other debs, however, she resists the idea that she is participating under such qualifications—a common occurrence of what I call “distancing” that will be discussed more in the section on participant rationalizations.

As a result of these sacrifices of personal identity revealed by ambivalent and partially resisting debutantes, such interviewees described to me a process of trying to manage their identity to outsiders, as a way to retain control of their self-concept in the face of the debutante homogenization. Knowing that the debutante ball has a negative stereotype in the social world that they as individuals identify with, these debutantes struggled to explain or, furthermore, hide their participation to outsiders, depending on the social audience. For several such debs, these

differing social circles were separated by hometown experiences and college experiences. For example, Emma described to me how this tension between her upbringing and her identity as a college student—which she termed a “metamorphosis”—was accentuated through her label as a debutante:

I was just kind of like, embarrassed and trying to keep it a secret. And the main thing was like, having to tell my new friends what I was doing was like, really weird, and because it's like, whenever I would tell people about it who didn't know me when I was growing up, this whole set of associations would dawn on them and they would suddenly have this like, set of knowledge about my background that otherwise never would have been like, explicitly stated. And it isn't even explicitly stated, it's just associated with being a debutante. And no one really knows what it is, so then you have to like, explain it. And there isn't really a good explanation [laughter].

Emma's struggle to manage her new friends' concept of her shows how some debutantes sacrifice total control over their own desired identity by participating in the debutante process. Furthermore, her description of this management depicts the emotional consequence of shame that such debs, I found, often exhibit when talking about this tension between their old selves and new selves—an interesting phenomenon within the data that showed how some debutante women sought to resist the homogeneity of debutante culture by aligning themselves with factors of identity that lie outside debutante culture. However, this increase in heterogeneity within women's own definition of their identities, such as belonging in non-debutante social circles, was seen in tension with the homogeneity of debutante culture that seeks to bring in a certain type of family and, indeed, maintains boundaries to keep other types of individuals out. An assistant marshal I spoke with, Henry, also observed emotional discomfort within his debutante date concerning her identity that seemed to result from a similar tension between homogenous culture of a deb's old identity and heterogeneous culture of a deb's new identity. Like Emma, this debutante's distress also came from struggling to self-determine her identity and being uncomfortably assimilated into the world of debdom:

I think coming to a university like [university], [debutante] had her own identity as a progressive thinker in her own regard and this was a...something tying her to an old world of strange customs and conservative tradition.

And so she was very squeamish and was constantly trying to duck out of events while we were there. She was very apologetic and didn't think that I would understand what was going on or why she was doing this, but she was very clearly from that world. ...She probably had a reaction against older ties, or ties to elements of her identity that she didn't want to keep.

Henry's description of his date's uneasiness at the deb ball, specifically as it concerned her identity, brings to light that this, indeed, may be a practical purpose of the debutante tradition: to reign back in newly progressive thinkers or trail-blazers within elite families after their first year of college and intentionally reconnect them with their familial and cultural roots. As Henry describes, his date was clearly attempting through her college experience to cut ties to the identity she was assigned through her upbringing, but debutante involvement complicated this process. This exact dilemma was described later in the data collection process by a debutante who similarly struggled to reconcile the tension between her hometown identity and college identity:

...Especially my first year of college, I had grown away from the idea of being exclusive. I went to a pretty exclusive private high school, so I was really sick of being labeled the snobby rich girl and I thought that the deb was just going to continue that classification on me. So in college I was able to distance myself a little bit from that image and I thought that being a deb was just going to throw me right back into it.—participant Catherine

Here Catherine describes how participation in the debutante ball harmed not only her own desired image that was in construction through college, but also threatened newly-developed principles that were important to her as a person, such as embracing inclusivity. Catherine certainly did not stand out as an anomaly in the data in this regard: several other ambivalent and partially resisting debs also discussed elements of the debutante ritual that they disagreed with. For example, when I asked Lauren to explain her thoughts on the process of the presentation ceremony, she told me she thought it was “an antiquated belief of your father giving you away to society and your father giving you away in marriage.” Similarly, several ambivalent and partially resisting debutantes discussed their discomforts with certain elements of debutante culture, such as the lack of people of color, the material excess and focus on socioeconomic

status, and the upholding of patriarchal ideas about women's place in society. All but one of these critical debutantes, however, participated in the event, and as a result found themselves experiencing discomforts in terms of their own identity and principles in order to debut. As assistant marshal Henry, an outside-insider of debutante culture, synthesized the dilemma: “[a debutante is] conceding [her] own position as a secondary member of society and [is] acquiescing to this very bizarre and racist and classist structure and institution.”

If, as I have shown, debutantes across degrees of willingness find themselves having to give up something for participation, whether it is physical and/or emotional comfort during the ceremony or self-determined identity or principles, why do so many women show up at the presentation ceremony year after year? In the following section, I discuss the three often intersecting pull factors of family, friends, and fun that lead debutantes to make such personal sacrifices for participation.

Section 3: Family, friends, and fun: distracting debs from coercion and creating an illusion of consent

I basically only knew that it was this pretentious, southern tradition, and I was initially very, very against it, I was like, ‘I don’t stand for that, I don’t want to go to that, I don’t want to be around a lot of gossipy girls who are pretentious and feel so high and mighty about themselves.’ But then I started talking to [grandma] after I got the invitation, and found out that it was more about dresses and eating and mingling and having fun and enjoying family and kind of celebrating [pause] I guess our culture, in a sense. And then that’s when I was like, ‘oh, this is really cool’ and that’s when she starting taking me through the process.—participant Hannah

Even though fourteen out of the fifteen participating debutantes I spoke with admitted to sacrificing some bit of personal comfort during the debutante process, not one of them left unanswered the question of why, then, they participated. As I found throughout the data analysis, three primary factors stood out that contributed to debutantes’ eventual participation: desire to please family, the prospect of social inclusion (i.e. knowing friends there already), and the appeal of fun, parties, and dressing up. I was surprised to find that these factors do not differ

substantially across degrees of willingness: every debutante mentioned family as a contributing factor, and while ambivalent/resisting debs were more likely to only cite family and enthusiastic debs were more likely to mention all three factors, these trends did not hold true across the board. For example, ambivalent/resistant debutante Emma cited all three factors in explaining her participation, while enthusiastic/ambivalent debs, such as Hannah and Allie, only mentioned family and fun (see Table 2.) By examining the strengths of these contributing factors for debutante participation, I hope to shine light on what debs gain in return for sacrificing personal comfort, as discussed in the previous section. Knowing what debutantes perceive they will gain through participation is important, I hold, because these appealing factors of debdom work to create both insider cohesion and the illusion of consent that allow the aforementioned sacrifices and coerced elements of deb participation to go largely unnoticed or unchallenged by insiders. Such is the working of a hegemonic structure that employs both consent and coercion to solidify largely unquestioned participation.

Desire to please family

If my family hadn't done it before, I wouldn't have done it, I don't think. A big part of it for me was continuing the legacy, you know, the tradition. I just kind of wanted to make my grandma, especially make my grandma proud, and be like I'm doing this for you too, I'm doing it for me and for you. I knew it would make her happy...--participant Molly

As previously stated, a desire to please family members emerged in every interview with participating debutantes. Sometimes this pressure mostly came from parents and grandparents, but some participants described pressure from aunts and cousins, as well. Debutantes across degrees of willingness mentioned family pressure as a contributing factor to participation, but, as discussed above in the section on choice, enthusiastic debs were more likely to deny the existence of pressure. However, several such interviewees eventually admitted that family pressure was present, whether it was explicitly stated or not.

As the above quote from Molly demonstrates, pleasing family members often coincided with pressure to carry on a family tradition. Thirteen out of the fifteen participating debutantes I interviewed had prior generational connections to the North Carolina debutante ball—in other words, someone in the generation before them within their family had participated. Consequentially, tradition and family legacy emerged in nearly every interview conducted. Indeed, it is difficult to have a conversation about the debutante ritual without mentioning family and tradition. This sense of familial tradition is, furthermore, what contributes to the aforementioned assumptions that women within families will become debutantes at a certain age. Enthusiastic participant Megan described to me how her family's legacy within the debutante culture contributed to her participation: "It wasn't my whole decision that my family was really involved and had done it before, but it definitely made it an easier decision, if that makes sense. I knew that my grandparents—my grandmothers would absolutely love it and had done it before me, and that just adds another layer of importance, I guess, to the whole thing." Here, Megan demonstrates a desire for intergenerational connection (for example, granddaughters sharing an experience with their grandmothers), which occurred several times throughout the data. For example, enthusiastic/ambivalent debutante Hannah described her relationship with her grandparents: "They're part of this society and part of this culture of southern high class society forever, and I wanted to be a part of that, I wanted to be able to identify with my grandparents and I wanted to make my grandmother happy." For Megan and for Hannah—and for nearly every other debutante participant, as well—participating in something that had been done in their families before them played a great role in contributing to their eventual status as debutantes.

The two remaining interviewees who were first-generation debutante participants were not completely freed from familial pressure, though, as they each had sisters and cousins in their

own generation who had participated in the years before them. Indeed, one of these women, Hillary, told me that she felt she would have deliberated over her participation more if she had been the oldest daughter in her family. Additionally, the other first-generation debutante, Lauren, described to me that, even though she felt her immediate family members were ambivalent as to her participation, she knew that her paternal grandmother would be pleased with her status as a debutante, due to reasons concerning upward social mobility. Thus for Lauren, even though the draw of tradition was not necessarily present within her participation, family pressure nonetheless played a role in shaping her membership in debutante culture. Furthermore, a mother of first-generational debutantes admitted to me that having prior involvement in the deb tradition would have changed her perspective on the importance of her daughters' participation: "I really do think, Anna, that if it had been a tradition in my family, I would be a little—I would be different about it, it's just that it's not a tradition, so to me, it was just fun. I didn't have any other stuff invested in it, so I think I would have a different perspective than someone like [friend] who everyone in her family has done it." This acknowledgment that family tradition changes the nature of participation was echoed by Kelsey, the one declining debutante from my sample, when she explained to me that the primary reason she felt free to make the choice to decline her invitation was because her parents were not strongly tied to debutante culture and therefore did not put pressure on her.

Though there is much more to be said concerning the weight of debutantes' desire to please family members, this factor of debutante participation is so integral to other aspects of the overall process that it is nearly impossible to discuss the remaining sections without re-emphasizing the role that families play in shaping debutantes' participation. For now, then, suffice it to say that desire to please family acts as a major motivating force for debutante

participation—one that debutantes throughout the data consistently used to rationalize coercive elements of the process.

Prospects of social inclusion

But honestly I don't think I would have done it if I didn't have friends doing it, because then the parties would be awkward and [pause] I don't know. But since we had such a good group doing it and we all knew probably more people than we can count on our two hands, that made it more fun.—participant Hillary

The promise of knowing other close friends at debutante events emerged numerous times throughout the data as women explained to me their degree of willingness concerning debutante participation. Particularly for ambivalent debutantes, already knowing other participants was often revealed throughout the interviews as a necessity to their willing participation. Conversely, not knowing other participants was seen as a major drawback that made prospective debutantes think through the relative gains and losses of participation more. Some interviewees described the decision as “automatic” once they realized they knew so many other prospective debutantes, and even for debutantes who identified as partially resistant, the presence of friends made their participation a more comfortable experience.

For example, ambivalent/resistant participant Sophie told me: “My best friend from high school called me and was like, ‘I refuse to do it unless you agree to do it with me.’ I think that might have actually been one of the reasons why I did do it, because it gave me a chance to spend the weekend with her when I wouldn't have otherwise.” Although Sophie had earlier explained to me that she was not a debutante by choice, her description of the presence of a close friend at the debutante includes a shift in perception of her participation, where she takes on more ownership of her “decision” to debut. Furthermore, Sophie's best friend's words highlight how debutante participation often takes the form of a bargaining process, where women concede to participate as long as another factor can console them, such as the opportunity to spend time with close friends. In this way, Sophie's story nicely demonstrates how social inclusion—a pull

factor for many debutantes—contributes to the “consent” notion at play within the hegemony of debutante culture, working to create an illusion of independent choice.

Similar to Sophie and her friend, several other debutante participants told me that, were it not for knowing so many people who were debuting as well, they would have opposed participation a bit more. Participant Amanda—mother of two first-generational debutantes—echoed this sentiment with a bold proclamation that having prior social connections to the debutante ball is a necessity than can make or break one’s experience:

And if I had a daughter that was making her debut and was asked to make her debut and none of her friends were doing it, then I would say not to do it. I think it’s totally—I mean, I think your fun is based on how many people you know that are there, and of course you can make new friends, but I don’t think it’s a great setting to make new friends, so I honestly think that if you don’t go into it with a group of friends you are looking forward to being around, then I just don’t think I would advise that person to do it.

Indeed, declining participant Kelsey affirmed this advice from Amanda when she told me that part of what caused her to decline her invitation was the (false) assumption that she would not know any other debutantes: “I mean [pause] if I had known who was doing it, then a benefit would have been like, going to the parties with those people. Like because obviously I was friends with [other debutantes], like that would have been fun. But I had no idea who was doing it. And by the time I knew I had already sent in my rejection letter.” Here Kelsey nicely connects two factors that, I found, debutantes often cite as justifying reasons to participate: social inclusion and parties/fun. In the next section, I explore what debutantes had to say about parties, fun, and dressing up in conjunction with their own degrees of willingness for participation, as well as how this pull factor functions to contribute to debutante hegemony.

The appeal of parties, fun, and dressing up

I think there’s a dissonance with... It’s a big party! I mean, I don’t think a lot of people our age, even if they can recognize—even if they DO recognize what the debutante ball really means, they’re not going to turn down free food, the chance to dress up, a chance to hang out with maybe a guy that they’re interested in, and they’re not going to turn down their weekend of glory and attention.—assistant marshal Henry

One aspect of the debutante process that I did not expect to play such a role in debutantes' perception of their participation was the appeal of the parties thrown the summer before the presentation ceremony. For the North Carolina debutante process, three major parties are hosted in three regions across the state: the west, the east, and the capitol. The appeal of attending these parties came up in nearly every interview, with ambivalent/resisting debs mentioning the parties less than fully ambivalent and enthusiastic debs. Often the prospect of social inclusion and the appeal of fun, parties, and dressing up were mentioned in conjunction with one another, as the parties provided sites of spending time with other debutantes. These parties the summer before the presentation ceremony allowed for debutantes to bond with one another before the ultimate weekend in Raleigh, usually by strengthening pre-existing social ties, rather than forming new social ties—a function of the debutante process that I will discuss in future sections. Furthermore, even for debutantes who went into the process without knowing a large amount of participants, the idea of getting to attend parties throughout the summer before made participation seem a bit more tolerable. These debs enjoyed not only the social aspect of attending parties, but also getting the chance to dress up.

Dressing up and attending nice events was, indeed, revealed through the data to be seen as a sort of rite of passage for young women. For example, mother participant Amanda explained to me why she and her family ultimately thought that her daughter—a first-generation debutante—should consider participating: “One of the reasons too that we thought—that I thought it might be fun for her was that, because she wasn't participating in a Greek system at [university], so she wasn't going to parties and—you know, dress-up parties—and I knew that was one thing...she didn't regret not being in a sorority, but she did miss the opportunity to dress up and go to fun parties.” Amanda's explanation of the appeal of parties shows that the debutante

process is understood to be special from other parties, because it involves the opportunity to dress up for an event—something that also speaks to the economic capital both needed for and displayed at debutante events. In this way, debutante parties appealed to what several participants called the “girlie” side of women, giving them an “excuse” to embrace this side aspect of their femininity. For example, participant Molly told me that, although she was ambivalent about participation and even had her own personal qualms with the racism, sexism, and classism of the event, she was the most excited about the “fun” involved in the process: “The parties sounded fun ... it’s just kind of an excuse to get together with friends and dress up and have fun.”

The parties provided not only an “excuse” to buy dresses and be with friends, but also an opportunity for debutantes and their dates to drink underage. Though several debutante participants I spoke with said that alcohol played a major role in deb events, few interviewees admitted to having partaken in this aspect of deb culture themselves. Nonetheless, there was a steady acknowledgment among participants that a culture of getting away with underage drinking exists throughout the deb process. Indeed, enthusiastic participant Emily boldly stated: “I think sometimes the parties in the summer, it’s just an excuse to, for like college age students to—I mean 95% of the time just to drink and to have fun. Or like buy a new dress. And I think it’s definitely an excuse for people to have a party. And that’s how some people see it, which is unfortunate.” Emily’s description of the appeal of the debutante process for many participants shows how fun, parties, and dressing up also connects with a culture of underage drinking. In fact, it was rare that, during an interview, the parties were discussed without a mention of the pervasiveness of alcohol usage. Participants painted pictures to me of debutantes and their dates lying drunkenly on tables, dancing wildly on the dance floor, vomiting in bathrooms, and leaving

airplane bottles of liquor scattered on the floor. I was told that on more than one occasion, doctors had to be called in to check on participants and, in some cases, ambulances needed to take debutantes or their dates to the hospital. Furthermore, in numerous interviews, debutante insiders told me that several clubs and establishments throughout the state will no longer host debutante events, due to ensuing damage caused by intoxicated behavior.

Despite this understanding of the issues caused by underage drinking, the Terpsichorean Club is hesitant to change the debuting age from nineteen to twenty-one due to a worry that women will not be interested in debuting at that age. For example, former Terps member Gordon told me that he felt that a woman would be too busy and too mature to care about going to parties and dressing up by the time she is twenty-one. Based on what I came to understand through interviews with debutantes and parents, however, it seems like another reason that may compel a nineteen year-old to participate more so than a twenty-one year-old is the opportunity to drink underage and face little consequences. In other words, when debutantes and their dates are twenty-one, they do not need the debutante process to provide them with an opportunity to procure alcohol—this option is always legally available to them. Nineteen year-olds, however, might be a bit more eager for an opportunity to access alcohol. The lack of serious consequences participants face for underage drinking was brought to light in the data when insiders told me that every party had a “time-out” room. When attendees became too intoxicated, they were sentenced, not with a charge for underage alcohol possession—as is the drinking law in North Carolina—but with a nudge into the “time-out” room, where they could sober up and rejoin the party when ready.

In this way, I learned, alcohol is integral to the debutante process. Many participants I spoke with said that they felt this was a contradiction within deb culture, saying that the process

was supposed to be “classy,” and drunkenness did not seem to belong within such a culture. In these cases, such participants implied that the deb ball has not always been this way, but rather the pervasiveness of alcohol is the result of the modernization of the process. On the contrary, as I spoke with participants from several decades preceding the 2010s, I learned that alcohol has long been a major crux of deb events. For example, Arthur told me of his experience as an assistant marshal in the 1950s: “Well, alcohol to me has run a lot of deb events. The debs from several areas get together and they ... would get together and have a party at the [club] at [town]. Well, they got so rowdy and out of control, [club] won’t let them come back and have another party, is what I’ve heard.” Furthermore, Gordon, the former Terpsichorean member I spoke with, discussed the change in the drinking age from eighteen to twenty-one as if it has been an obstacle to carrying on the debutante process in its usual manner:

Well, the alcohol [laughter], that’s really changed things a lot. When I was coming along, all the debs and marshals and everybody was of age, they could drink beer and wine. And now that’s not allowed, because the drinking age changed. And so that’s just created some [pause] practical problems in running this whole weekend and the whole summer, cause you have to be restrictive on that and have all these rules and regulations and it’s just made it harder to do.

In this way, although it appears to the modern eye that the amount of drunkenness at parties has to do with “kids these days,” I learned that having a good time at deb events has, for several decades, involved alcohol consumption. Indeed, underage drinking was explained to me by debutantes and parents throughout interviews as an “expectation,” and something that simply comes with participation. For example, Nate, the brother of a debutante from the 2000s, recalled: “I do remember being traumatized by the amount of public drunkenness at this party. I was like, this is supposed to be a nice event where like, all the elite families come together and all their kids are just like, plastered. ... I remember my parents being kind of upset, but they were like, ‘oh well, it’s just part of it.’” Nate’s parents were not alone in this attitude, as a similar sentiment of acceptance was expressed throughout the data.

Because parties presented opportunities for socializing, dressing up, and consuming alcohol, this aspect of the debutante process works, I found, to distract participants from larger issues, such as the discomfort of the presentation ceremony and personal sacrifices of identity and principles discussed in the previous section. For example, Amanda discussed her daughter's discomfort with the exclusivity of the event, but ended by explaining that, since she had close friends partaking in the ritual to attend parties with, "it just seemed like a fun weekend for her and I don't think that we sat around and thought about the social implications that much."

Similarly, declining debutante Kelsey exemplified this thought-process of weighing the pros and the cons of participation: "Really the only thing fun about it would have been the parties [laughter.] Like actually going out on stage, I probably wouldn't have cared for that too much." Ultimately Kelsey decided to not participate, because she did not feel pressure from her parents, did not think she would know any friends to go to the parties with, and the process did not line up her self-concept of her own identity. This rationalization succinctly demonstrates how prospective debutantes weigh the potential benefits of pleasing family, spending time with friends, and having fun against the potential losses of personal comfort and preferences.

As I conducted interviews, I noticed this trend of feeling uncomfortable about elements of deb culture, yet simultaneously upholding participation by pointing to the other factors of family, friends, and fun. This phenomenon caused me to recognize the strategic pairing of consent and coercion that Antonio Gramsci discusses in his theory of hegemonic institutions (Bennett 192). One interviewee in particular—an assistant marshal named Alex—brought this occurrence to light when he explained to me the necessity of parties to keep women interested in debuting:

Honestly, when you get chosen to do it, it's a summer of parties. And I think that's where they made it apply more to the modern age of girls. Cause they get to say, 'hey, there's going to be three massive parties you get to go to and then like five on the weekend of the actual event, oh and one ball that you have to walk across the

stage at.’ ...I think everyone has such a good mentality about it because it puts so much other focus on these parties and stuff that would get girls excited. If it was just, ‘hey, you’re going to walk across a stage, then you’re done,’ I don’t think anybody would be too thrilled about it. It would be like, ‘oh, I’m doing this for my great-aunt’ or something, but because they make it more modern, I guess, it’s more... fun.

Alex’s explanation of the necessary presence of the parties to balance out the unappealing—yet dominant—event of the presentation ceremony nicely demonstrates how consent and coercion work together to give the illusion of choice. Notice, for example, the picture he paints towards the end of his quote of a debutante process without parties: it seems coerced, as if the debutantes are not doing it of their own free will. Implied in this explanation, then, is the notion that, simply because there are parties to attend and fun to be had, any coercive elements of participation in the presentation ceremony are washed away. Indeed, the narrative he imagines, in which “they” (the Terpsichorean Club members, perhaps) essentially negotiate with the debutantes and persuade them to participate, sounds sneaky and strategic, as if the parties are thrown in as a distraction away from the presentation ceremony. And yet, in this scheme, the presentation ceremony is what “they” are after—a caveat that will be discussed in later sections.

In this section, I have demonstrated how appeals of debutante participation such as pleasing family, spending time with friends, and having fun contribute to an illusion of consent to debutante participation. As I discussed in the previous section, however, debutantes almost always perceive that they are also giving up something of their own preference and desire through participation. Of course, if debutante participants realize that they both give something up and gain something from participation, this tension requires a process of rationalization: an emerging theme from the data explored in the next section.

Section 4: Participant rationalization: upholding hegemony

It almost sounds weird using the original reasoning for it now. Because now, what is the purpose, you know? I mean I know that sounds terrible, and I know it is tradition, but why do they have to dress up and walk across the stage? So that was the only thing I found was—I think a lot of people’s conceptions were...I think there were misconceptions through that, through me saying ‘oh, it’s a girl’s introduction to society.’ Or like, you

know, it doesn't sound like something someone in the modern day would do, but then when you're there it still makes sense, because it's such a southern tradition.—assistant marshal Alex

I don't really see people from deb culture thinking about outside ramifications of the deb ball. It's such an internal thing, and [pause] I don't know, I doubt anyone's ever thought that deeply about it, it's just like, they keep doing what's been done before them, cause it's natural.—enthusiastic participant Megan

The tension between consent and coercion reared its head throughout interviews. Since the pairing of consent and coercion necessarily function to keep an institution from being questioned, several debutantes had never before questioned their place in deb culture before our interview. Indeed, when I asked them to explain what they perceived as the purpose of the debutante ball, many participants were considering this question for the first time, responding with “that’s a great question,” followed by a long pause. Realizing the conflicting elements of consent and coercion, debutantes found themselves in a place in our interview where they needed to rationalize their own participation by explaining the debutante ball in terms that would excuse their place in it. This section, therefore, is devoted to the process of these rationalizations. As I show, many debutante insiders discussed the meaning and purpose of the debutante ball in terms of contrasting past and present purposes: for example, “it used to mean X, but now it means Y.” In these cases, debdom always used to be about availability about marriage, but not anymore. Some participants took this contrasting a step further, though, to distance themselves not only from past purposes, but from present purposes, as well, by explaining that, “to some people today, the debutante ball means X, but to my family it means Y.” In these cases, the debutante ball often meant social elitism to other participants, but to their own families, the process meant special time with family.

Contrasting past and present purposes

Interviewees across degrees of willingness consistently told me that the purpose of the debutante tradition used to be to introduce a woman to society so that she could be ready for

marriage, but now this meaning is lost and is replaced by other purposes such as parties, tradition, and social status. Based on these explanations that, if accurate, would depend on some sort of cultural shift in the ritual's meaning, thereby having consequences of redefined social boundaries as well, I was curious to hear from participants who attended several decades prior to the 2010s what their perception of the debutante process' purpose was at the time. I found that none of the past participants I spoke with described the event as ever having the concrete purpose of marriage eligibility, suggesting that this element of deb culture has stayed somewhat consistent over the years. It seems that debutante status—at least within the Terpsichorean ball that has existed since the 1920s—has always had its meaning in a family's position in society. For example, Elaine—a debutante in 1948—helped me understand this phenomenon:

I: Was there any conversation about [debuting] kind of being, like you are officially a member of society?

R: No. No. Uh-uh.

I: Okay.

R: I don't think people thought that so much as, "what an honor" and how much...what a nice thing for you and your family to be honored in this way.

Although it seems like the Terpsichorean ball has never truly been about presenting a woman to society, participants still used the term "coming out to society" to explain the purpose of the process. For example, ambivalent/resistant debutante Beth told me that her parents wanted her to make her debut so that she could come out to society. When asked what "coming out" meant to her parents, though, Beth admitted that she did not know, and clarified that she did not think her parents actually viewed her differently after the presentation ceremony. Similar to Beth, several debutantes told me that the idea that a woman is now ready for marriage is an outdated concept that people misunderstand about debutante culture. As enthusiastic participant Megan put it:

I think what confuses people the most is the whole, like—or what people our age make fun of is the ‘coming out to society.’ Like for my family and me, that’s not what it was about, obviously [laughter.] It’s more about a family tradition and spending time with your family... even my grandparents don’t really think that I’m coming out to society, you know what I mean? No one actually uses that terminology even ...unless it’s as a joke.

Despite Megan’s assertion that “no one actually uses that terminology,” the invitation to make one’s debut does, indeed, include such phrasing, as the Terpsichorean Club invites women to be “presented.” Additionally, I was shocked to discover as I looked through my own old documents of instructions for debutante participation that the Terpsichorean Club asks women to decline their invitation if they are engaged to be married. In this way, it seems that there is, after all, some significance to women being single when they are “presented” to society. This was echoed throughout the interviews as research participants would claim that the old reason of being available for marriage is gone, yet would proceed to express how strange it would be for a married woman to make her debut. In this way, it seemed like participants intentionally deflected criticisms that the debutante ball is a sexist event with current meaning rooted in women’s dependence on men. Furthermore, participants seemed to be employing denial of such sexist implications to affirm the practice as culturally legitimate, rather than harmful or irrelevant.

Overall there seemed to be a degree of contradiction between the old purpose and the current purpose of making one’s debut—a complication that was resolved by participants time and again by pointing to “tradition.” For example, participants would tell me that all debutantes wear white dresses because making your debut used to be similar to a wedding, but now they continue to wear such attire not because of anything matter of significance, but simply because it is “tradition.” In this way, “tradition” is used by those involved in debutante culture to escape criticisms for continuing rituals that have historically “outdated” meanings. This is where parties come back into the picture then: if debutante participation was only about the presentation ceremony, participants, it seems, would question the process a bit more. But because of the

appealing elements offered by provided parties, the presentation ceremony—though the crux of the ritual—loses focus via the distraction of social events. Indeed, many debutante insiders I spoke with explained that, whereas the ritual used to be about marriage and procuring one's place in society as an eligible young lady, the process is now just an excuse to have a big party.

Modern purpose of parties

I think now it really is supposed to just be a party. Or like... obviously they're not doing it to be like, 'okay, so men, these are your options.' [Laughter]—participant Emma

Because many participants were uncomfortable with certain elements of the debutante process, such insiders rationalized their participation by telling me that the ritual now just boils down to an excuse for social fun. Indeed, the phrase “big party” occurred several times throughout the data, usually from participants who did not attach much sentimental or traditional value to the event. This justification was used to combat criticisms that the deb ball perpetuates problematic ideas about race, class, and gender. For example, ambivalent/resistant deb Meredith explained her discomfort with these elements of the debutante process, but ultimately downplayed their relevance to the ritual today:

I didn't like the history behind it, like I wasn't really into that. I think it's kind of dumb. And I don't like the racism behind it. But I don't think those are really part of it. I mean looking at it realistically, people make jokes about that, like, 'ha ha, that's a racist patriarchal, like, marriage thing,' but I don't think that's really what it's like. Like, maybe, but I don't really think it is. I think it's mostly a social thing and the reason I don't like it is because I don't want to hang out with those people all the time.

Unlike other debs, though, Meredith used the focus of social events to explain why she did not want to participate, rather than why she did want to participate. Her explanation also draws on a distinction between past and present meanings of the deb ball, where she recognizes the “history” of white, patriarchal privilege, but separates that history from present-day implications. Like Meredith, Amanda, a mother of two debutantes, exhibited a similar process of skirting around uncomfortable associations of deb culture by rationalizing that the process today is merely a large-scaled social event. Amanda's thought-process shows how even participants

who are socially aware often attempt to rationalize participation by downplaying social implications and instead focusing on social fun:

Yeah, we had talked about [race] actually, because I wasn't sure [pause] we weren't sure how one of [husband]'s brothers...we thought that [brother and his wife] might really disapprove. Because they're just a lot more [pause] what's the word—inclusive.They're very inclusive of everybody of any nationality, race, sexual orientation, whatever, they're just very inclusive people. So we thought that they might really disapprove and think that we were really doing something so horrible. But [husband] actually talked to his brother about it and [brother] said, 'you know, the way I look at it is it's a party. You got an invitation. You can say yes or no.' It's not—like to him, he said—it's not like this great honor. ...So it's just basically a social party and you get invited, you have the option of saying yes or no.

Amanda's rationalization process reveals that some participants, by viewing debutante participation as a big party without social implications, actually downplay the importance of their inclusion in the culture. For example, Amanda told me throughout our interview that she did not view deb participation as a big honor, and felt that their family's inclusion did not have anything to do with their family's accomplishments, but rather just with whom they were friends.

Focusing on the deb ball as something that a large group of friends participate in together, then, helps to lessen any discomforts surrounding the exclusive nature of the ritual, as well as what the process historically—and currently—says about divisions of race, class, and gender. Similar to Amanda, several other participants claimed that being involved in deb culture did not carry, for them, any sort of significance of elite status. Many of these participants, though, did recognize that the ball could be used for such purposes—they, however, intentionally distanced themselves from this group.

In-group distancing between modern purposes of status versus tradition

I still think that there are people who use it as a status. I don't think that [participant's family] used it as a status, I think [participant's family] wanted it because it was a tradition. So and so did it, so and so did it, [niece] did it, [niece] did it, that type, you know what I'm saying. So it was a tradition and [participant's brother] wanted to finish out a tradition.—participant Natalie

A recurring theme that emerged through the data was a phenomenon I refer to as in-group distancing: participants, in rationalizing modern purposes of deb participation, recognized that

something about debdom works nicely alongside procuring elite status, but distanced themselves from such tacky motivations by clarifying that they, themselves, were not there for reasons pertaining to status. Of course, it is hard to imagine that anyone would openly admit within an interview that they participated in debutante culture to be recognized as socially distinct.

Often, participants who utilized this process of distancing within their own rationalization pointed to family tradition and bonding time as the reason why the debutante ball is meaningful to them and their families. For example, although assistant marshal Alex is not connected to deb culture through his own family, he was connected to the process through a social circle of friends at the events, and therefore sought to identify himself with a certain meaning that he felt provided a respectable reason for participation: tradition. Indeed, Alex went as far as to create a dichotomy of types of people involved in the debutante ball, based on their motivations for participation:

I think there were two main reasons behind people's motivations to even do it. My group as a whole was definitely tradition. I feel like a lot of the families were there for some form of social status and being able to say [speaks in sophisticated Southern accent] 'oh well my daughter was a debutante.' So that was definitely evident in some hoity-toity, more...there were lots of doctors and misses and doctors and doctors and doctors and doctors on the list and just very prestigious people there and a lot of it was just social status for some, but a lot of it was very traditional, very much based on tradition.

Although Alex recognizes that deb culture involves elite status, he ignores questions of why his friends were included in the event in the first place, and instead focuses on the traditional meaning of the event for these families. Furthermore, his dichotomy implies that to be there for reasons pertaining to social status is worthy of being frowned upon, whereas attending for the sake of tradition is a much more honorable motivation. Like Alex, interviewees time and again spoke poorly of attendees who were there, it seemed, so that they could be socially recognized. However, no one I spoke with could succinctly explain how they knew these families were there only for social status. It seemed to me, then, that participants across the board

could recognize the problematic presence of social elitism, but no one could quite bring themselves to articulate why this was or to identify with this phenomenon of deb culture. Indeed, even for participants who did not point to tradition as an explanation for participation, social elitism was recognized, but not taken ownership of. For example, Lauren explained to me that her family participated because of social connections, but, in her rationalization, did not account for the ways in which social capital implies social elitism:

Some people, I think, it's that they see it as a status symbol, whereas my family was just kind of like 'oh we're friends with the people who pick, so like, yay!' [laughter] ... But I think it's almost a way of people reinforcing like their status as high-class individuals, and so it's a thing that's going to be keep happening as long as people want to see themselves above other people.

Thus although several participants displayed a recognition that the debutante ball enables the continuation of social elitism, they rationalize their own place within this process by claiming an indifference to their own social status.

In this section on participant rationalization, I have shown that, in general, participants find their position within debutante culture a tricky thing to explain. This rationalization process always involved recognizing something problematic about the process (e.g. it used to be about marriage; it can be used for social status), followed by a form of justification that distances the participants from those problematic elements (e.g. it is now only a party; our family did it for tradition) within the group to which they belong. I have included this section to expand on how the debutante process, as an institution that draws in hundreds of families year after year, utilizes both consent and coercion to cause participation, which must then be rationalized by insiders. Indeed, the very function of this hegemonic strategy is to make a powerful structure and process such as the debutante ball seem commonsensical. As I have shown, many participants experienced having to talk through the purpose of the debutante ball for the first time during our interview, which often resulted in participants upholding their own place in deb culture by

pointing to fun and family tradition. In the next and final section, I wrap up the previous sections' discussions on choice, coercion, consent, and rationalization by explaining what this complicated process of ensuring hegemony is for, anyway: the protection and continuation of capital within certain elite families.

Section 5: The goals of hegemonic participation: reproduction of capital and maintenance of social boundaries

I think that his daughter playing a role in the debutante ball and where he comes from in the social circles that he runs in is a suggestion, just like other parents for their children going to an elite college, is a suggestion that she is continuing the tradition that he is in. And so it's a status symbol, like driving a really nice car, except it's a little bit more like...people can get to the point where they can drive a nice car in our society. I mean that doesn't always happen, but you can presumably make money when your parents didn't have enough money and buy a nice car. But this is an exclusive club that reproduces your status in society. And so [a father's] daughter having that place in society reiterates that he is elite and that his children will continue to be in that position.—Henry, assistant marshal

Although most debutante insiders I spoke with brushed off questions about larger societal effects of the ritual by claiming it only has consequences for those who participate, the data reveals that there is much more occurring within the debutante process than what meets the eye. Debutantes across degrees of willingness implied that the whole process is “superficial” and fails to change the participants' lives. Time and again, when I asked debutantes what they gained from making their debut, interviewees responded that they only gained fond memories with friends and family. Some conceded that they could possibly social network in the future, using debutante connections, but overall participants maintained that making their debut was not a life-changing experience. I found, however, that, although being presented to society through the North Carolina Terpsichorean debutante ball may not seem like much to individual nineteen year-old women at the time, participation does seem to have a larger meaning to families that exceeds mere sentimental value.

In the following section, I attempt to explain the vested interest that families have in attaining debutante position for their daughters. I start off by demonstrating how the ritual has

little to do with individual women, and is, in actuality, about debutantes' families as a whole. I then explain—drawing on the work of sociological theorist Pierre Bourdieu—the three types of capital that can be displayed or accumulated through deb participation: social, economic, and cultural capital. Next I demonstrate how the debutante process works to protect and continue this capital, via connecting and strengthening ties between the next elite generation. This entire process, as I show, allows parents and their children to connect with one another as well, as parents pass down elite status to their now-adult children—a social marker of success that calls for extravagant celebration. Furthermore, I draw on the work of Michéle Lamont and Virág Molnár to show how this intentional protection of capital and maintenance of social ties works to keep social boundaries of deb culture defined, making it clear who belongs in this group and who does not. In this way, I use this section to wrap up remaining unanswered questions as to what, precisely, allows the debutante ball to not only survive, but to thrive in North Carolina to this very day.

Families, rather than individual daughters

But that's the thing, it doesn't matter who you are, you're in the family. It doesn't matter who you are as an individual, they could care less about it. You're in the family, so you're going to do it.—Nate, brother of a debutante

One of my aims going into this research project was to find out how debutantes are selected to participate. I had heard from my own friends and family that women were invited to make their debut based on both family legacy and family contribution to the community. I asked several debutante participants if they knew how the selection process works, and while some of them had a vague idea, no one felt confident saying that they fully understood the structure or criteria. Indeed, some of the debutantes expressed that this part of the process is a bit of a mystery to them, and asked me to let them know if I found out through my research. I was able to interview a past Terpsichorean member, who explained that family connection carries the

most weight for inclusion and that the invitation decision is ultimately determined by the Terpsichorean members and their wives. However, he also stressed that secret nominators throughout the state recommend prospective debutantes based on their own accomplishments as individual women. Indeed, he told me that this focus on the meritocracy of the women involved is a modern development of the debutante process.

This statement was contradicted in my findings, though, as participating debutantes claimed either to not know why they were invited to debut or to refer to their families' involvement. Time and again, debutantes stressed that they felt they had not done anything to deserve debutante status, but rather their opportunity to participate was the result of their parents' social connections. For example, when Lauren told me that she received gifts from some of her parents' friends, she expressed confusion: "I was like, I didn't do anything. This is not an occasion that I deserve a present for." Like Lauren, other debutantes also displayed confusion and feelings of individual unworthiness to be participating. Unlike most debutantes, though, ambivalent/resistant participant Meredith was not necessarily confused as to why she was chosen to debut, but felt that the reason why she was invited was problematic and not something worth celebrating: "To me I just don't see why [dad] has a problem if I didn't do anything, except you were in this thing and gave a lot of money to it. Like that isn't much to be proud of to me. Like I don't see how...I didn't do anything to get into this. I just came from a decently wealthy family. But I think to him it's like, a nice reinforcer of that, if that makes sense."

Meredith's explanation of the criteria for deb inclusion brings up a crucial aspect of participation that was revealed in the data: debutantes were participating not for themselves, but rather for their parents/families. Of course, this phenomenon was demonstrated in previous sections pertaining to familial pressure and the desire to please family members. However,

Meredith's words shine light on why families often want their daughters to participate in the first place: position within debutante culture provides a way to reaffirm and display families' success in social, economic, and cultural capital. For example, Meredith talks about her family's socioeconomic background as "wealthy." While few debs or non-deb participants talked as openly as Meredith about this function of deb participation, debutantes' descriptions of how their participation had more to do with their parents' social standing than their own accomplishments reinforce this theory of reproduction of capital within families. For example, Summer—the head debutante the year of her debut—told me that she, herself, did not accept her title as the head deb, but excused this in our interview by articulating that her role as a deb is actually about her parents:

My mom called me at camp was like, 'well, we just got a huge arrangement of flowers and they've asked you to be the leader of the ball.' And it wasn't really like a question, she just said 'we've accepted for you' basically. Cause I think it's like that title is given based kind of more on your parents, so they were like, we need to accept this for our family, I guess, because it's because of their involvement... It wasn't because of anything that I had done. My friends were always like, 'so why did you get to do that?' And I was like, 'it wasn't me, it was my parents.'

Here, Summer nicely displays how the "honor" of being distinguished as a debutante—or, in this case, even the head debutante—is not based on meritocracy, but on parents' social standing, which consequentially entitles parents to make decisions regarding their daughters' participation. Similar to Summer, multiple debutantes emphasized that they felt they needed to participate out of a commitment to what their parents wanted, because the deb ball, in actuality, is about their family as a whole, rather than about the debutantes themselves as individuals. Indeed, if debutante participation was about the individual women—what they had accomplished and what they wanted—why would family pressure to participate be so prevalent? Keeping in mind previous discussions of choice and coercion, then, it seems that debutantes often participate not as a statement of their own identity, but as a statement of their families' socioeconomic

status. As participant Hannah put it, “It was just another really cool thing to add to our family resume.”

Economic capital

R: But [in the 1940s] it was just the opportunity, knowing the honor that I had been extended. Because it was an honor. And I’m not so sure it is any more.

I: Why do you say that?

R: Because I think money can buy a lot of things.—participant Elaine

It does not require deep investigation to realize that debutante balls are largely bound up with matters of wealth and economic capital. As previously stated, the cost of merely accepting an invitation to debut is nearly \$3,000. Beyond this cost, however, families also must pay for hotel rooms (either for parties throughout the summer or for the presentation weekend in Raleigh), event attire (such as the iconic long, white dress or tuxedos), and any number of other expenses that accompany the event of gathering family together to attend such a formal affair. Because the whole process costs so much, clearly only families that have a certain level of disposable income can comfortably afford to have their daughters make their debut. Indeed, mother participant Amanda told me: “I think if you have some financial issues, I would definitely say not to do it, because it is very expensive.” In this way, the economic cost of making one’s debut ensures that those families who end up participating are the “haves,” rather than the “have-nots,” of society.

Once families are at the debutante events, this economic capital is not only affirmed, but also put on display by virtue of simply attending the events. As Nate, the brother of a debutante, explained, inclusion in debutante culture is a statement in and of itself of a family’s economic situation: “In [hometown], there’s this tacit competition, there’s this little level of like, the way people talk, you know, about their boat or like their house or their second house or whatever. But with the deb ball, you don’t have to talk. It says it all. You know, you made it. You got invited,

you got the letter, you get to go to the parties.” As Nate’s explanation demonstrates, a family’s visibility at the debutante ball functions as a signifier of their economic capital. But simple presence at the events is not where this display of wealth ends: rather, families can out-do other families present at the deb ball with additional expenses that go above and beyond what is required of participation. For example, assistant marshal Alex spoke of how he witnessed debutante participants displaying this wealth via social media: “Now present day [participants] can show it off more than they used to be able to and put it on Facebook or Instagram. So now there’s thousands of people that are going to be able to see, ‘oh, well such-and-such had this dress, and such-and-such had this experience and this necklace and this limo’ and whatever else comes with it.” Alex’s description of a debutante and her family flaunting their experience demonstrates how the debutante ball provides a prime site for displaying economic capital.

Furthermore, Elaine’s comment featured at the beginning of this section implies that having substantial economic capital and disposable income in general is part of the criteria nowadays of being invited to make one’s debut. When I asked Elaine if she thought it was possible for families who could not afford to make their debut to be invited to participate in the first place, she admitted she could not say for sure, but she seemed doubtful. She explained to me that invitations are largely based on connections within social circles, and that someone who could not afford the debutante ball could probably not afford to be friends with that social stratum in general. This explanation of inclusion—while most likely accurate—contradicts what I had heard from not only Elaine, but also other debutante insiders concerning criteria for invitations, and that is that families are invited to attend based, in large part, on their “contribution” to the community. When I asked Elaine to expand on this criterion, she painted a contradictory yet insightful picture as to what, exactly, this spirit of volunteerism looks like:

I was asked to collect money for the United Way, and the territory I had was a very poor district on the other side of town. And, I went up to some lady's house and I thought, 'She can't give. She can barely hold this house together.' And she gave me something like 30 cents. And she said 'I will never turn down the United Way because I will give what I can give, and it all adds up.' And I thought it's wonderful that somebody feels that way. *Now, I'm not saying that person should get into the debutante ball...* (Emphasis added)

As Elaine finished her story, I noticed a contradiction in her explanation of debutante inclusion. She had set out to explain to me the type of philanthropic attitude debutante society members look for in prospective participants, but had ended by clarifying that, actually, someone who could only afford to donate thirty cents should probably not be invited to join debutante culture. Her story demonstrated that, after all, a heart of community contribution is not what debutante inclusion is indicative of. Indeed, Elaine's clarification that a generous person living in poverty should not be invited to participate in the debutante ball suggests that wealth and the possession of economic capital is a necessity to group belonging. Elaine proceeded throughout the interview to explain that the debutante ball is purely a social event with no philanthropic component—a clarification that was brought up numerous times throughout the data by debutante insiders. I was left wondering, then, what this so-called "community contribution" looked like, or why it is supposedly held in such esteem, if the Terpsichorean Club itself blatantly exists for purely social purposes, with no intent to donate any revenue from the deb ball or give back to the community, themselves.

In short, debutante participation costs well over multiple thousands of dollars and therefore group membership is only available to those families that can afford such expenses. This is one way in which debutante culture functions to not only display wealth, but also to, as Lamont and Molnár theorize, maintain social boundaries that keep out families who are not in this certain socioeconomic stratum. Though economic capital and social capital can be separated as two distinct resources of advantage, the debutante ball nicely demonstrates how the two may interact to form social boundaries that are drawn around wealth. Participant Lauren alluded to

this relationship between economic and social capital in her explanation of why debutante participant was meaningful to her grandmother:

My grandma, who lives in [town], really wanted us to do it I think, because my sister didn't really want to do it [laughter] ...And she, I didn't realize this, but [sister] was telling me...apparently ... my grandma, was like really...I think she was pretty poor when she was growing up, and so she always looked up to people who were like, high-class. And in [town], being a deb is like, important to people, so I think she, like...this sounds so annoying, but I think she sees it as a social thing that like, her grandchildren were chosen to be in it. ...So I think she wanted to be able to be like, 'my granddaughter's a debutante!' It's very strange.

Lauren's description of her grandmother's excitement demonstrates how upward social mobility may be achieved for entire families based on women's participation in debutante culture. For Lauren and her family, participation was based not on family legacy, but on strong social connections. This avenue of entering debutante culture reveals that debdom enables families to display not only economic capital, but also social capital—a societal resource that I expand upon in the following section.

Social capital

I do believe that there's still people who do it for status. I mean I believe, no one has said it out loud, but I believe that there are probably people who can't afford to and they were asked to and, by golly, we're going to do it. Because, hey, this is a good thing. Get your picture in the paper, you know, "Oh [name], she made her debut." I do believe that, I don't know. And hey if that's the truth, who's going to say it? [Laughter]—participant Natalie

Although this quote from Natalie assumes that people who cannot easily afford the debutante are invited to participate—something that, while not impossible, is also, I argued in the previous section, not the norm—her words demonstrate the social value understood to be present in making one's debut. As she explains, having the socially visible title of "debutante" is an appealing advantage, and one that might be seen as so promising that families make sacrifices in other areas to procure such an advantage. This is because of the way in which debutante culture is understood to reaffirm and contribute to the accumulation of social capital, or, in other words, knowing the "right people" who can act as a resource for successfully navigating society.

As previously explained, the Terpsichorean Club is understood to be a strictly social organization. Members are chosen through a secretive process that cannot be applied for, but, rather, new members find themselves nominated by existing members with whom they have prior social connections. Debutante membership functions in much the same way, as debutantes and their families cannot apply for participation and, indeed, do not know for sure that they are invited to the event until the invitation arrives in the mail. (Although, former Terps member Gordon told me, it would be “highly unusual if not impossible” for the daughter of a family connected to the Terps club to not be invited.) In this way, group inclusion is most securely guaranteed by what Arthur—former assistant marshal, father of a debutante, and grandfather of debutantes—called “courting” the right people within certain social circles. Once a family is invited to participate, inclusion is seen as an “honor,” as I learned from the majority of participants.

Despite the obvious requirement of belonging within social elitism involved in debutante inclusion, debutantes tended to not address the social advantages gained by making one’s debut unless blatantly asked. In response to this question of what participants perceived that they socially gained, a few dates mentioned possibly seeing themselves down the line use deb connections for social networking. Most participants, however, told me that they did not feel at all changed by the process. As I gathered, this was likely because such debutantes were already so socially integrated into the communities present in deb culture that the events really did feel, to them, just like any other party. However, one debutante, Molly, gave a glimpse of potential social advantages one could gain by making her debut: “There was one guy I like went on a few dates with and he was really southern and he, like, found out I was a deb and told his mom, and his mom was like super impressed, and to me it’s just silly.” As Molly demonstrates, status as a

past debutante can distinguish a young woman in the south as socially acceptable for not only friendships and social networking opportunities, but for marital prospects as well.

Because the debutante ball is a social event, the process enables families to both show society that they belong with a certain elite group and to continue to nurture and strengthen ties with that elite group—a crucial function of debutante participation that, as I explore in later sections, is intentionally passed down throughout generations. Such boundary setting necessarily involves the need to prove members' group belonging. As I have shown, this group belonging is defined by the intersection of economic and social capital. However, as I will show in the following section, these two forms of capital mean little without a third societal resource: cultural capital.

Cultural capital

I: Was it possible [in the 1950s] for someone to be invited who had only been in North Carolina for a couple of years?

R: Not unless they had money. If they had money, that other group would reach out to them, I guess. They figure, oh, they got money, so therefore they got class. But everybody who got money don't have class, let's face it [laughter.]—Arthur, assistant marshal, father of debutante, grandfather of debutantes

As Arthur's words demonstrate, having enough material wealth to partake in debutante events and knowing the right people who extend invitations is not enough to truly belong in debutante society. One must also have "class," or cultural capital. I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's work in this section and refer to cultural capital as societal tools that take the form of a display of knowledge about how to act in a given social situation. In this case, debutante insiders attempt to prove their status as legitimate group members by behaving in ways that are deemed culturally appropriate by other group members. Important in this display of cultural capital, though, is that it is, indeed, a display: it is proof of what one already knows, rather than what one has the capacity to learn. For this reason, though the debutante ball is a formal affair, there are no

etiquette instructions or dancing lessons provided to debutantes through the process. Debutantes and their families might build to their cultural knowledge-set via exposure, but the purpose of the ball lies not in learning new behaviors, but in demonstrating cultural capital that has already been accumulated.

For example, when I asked debutantes if they learned anything new through participation or felt that they had truly become members of society, they usually laughed and told me, no, they felt no different than they had been before. Several debutantes explained that they had prior experience with social situations like the deb ball throughout their upbringing, and that their parents had educated them on how to behave in such environments. For example, Catherine told me: “I don’t think I learned anything in that experience that I haven’t also seen in other experiences. Like at some point in my life, yes, I’ve learned how to act at a cocktail party when you’re standing on your feet the whole time just, like, chatting with people, but I don’t think I learned those lessons exclusively from being a deb.” Similar to Catherine, Summer explained to me that the debutante ball was an opportunity for her to present the social skills that her parents had taught her:

I was expected to behave and to meet my parents’ friends and stuff, but I feel like even if I hadn’t done the deb ball, that would be something that I would be expected to do anyways, just like growing up, that was something that my parents had instilled, I feel like. But this was like an event where it was especially important that I behave and be polite and be like a young lady. [Laughter] Just cause that’s the norm I guess, that’s what’s expected [pause] at that event.

As Summer articulates, a participant’s behavior at deb events is telling not only of the woman herself, but perhaps more so of how her parents have raised her. Additionally, her description of what “behaving” at deb events looks like reveals the value of being able to socially mingle and make conversation with other participants. Indeed, the necessity of this skill was brought up time and again by debutante insiders, as they discussed either strengthening these skills or noticing when other participants lacked these skills. For example, when I asked Beth if

she noticed anyone throughout the process who did not fit the picture of the typical deb, she told me: “There were some really shy girls that were around me that really would not talk. And I just didn’t—I don’t know, I think of a debutante as being classy and, like, [pause] like well-dressed and well-spoken—or, not well-spoken, but like, being able to hold a conversation, I guess, with people.” Notice here Beth’s use of the word “classy” to describe debutantes who displayed such cultural capital, indicating that women who behave a certain way qualify as legitimate members of a certain class of citizens, presumably the “upper” class.

Indeed, like Beth, several interviewees expressed confusion and criticism over participants who did not practice the “right” behaviors. Sometimes, as Beth articulated, this took the form of a lack of adequate social practices, but, at other times, debutantes spoke lowly of participants who did not physically appear in the “right” way. For example, on multiple occasions, interviewees talked about debutantes they noticed who did not seem to put enough effort into their hair or make-up. Particularly, the topic of the dress emerged in these discussions, and several participants expressed confusion and frustration over other debs who wore “casual” (yet still long, white) dresses to the presentation ceremony. More than one deb told me that this made such participants seem like they did not want to be there and went as far as to call such under-dressing an act of “rebellion.” Similarly, Elaine—a debutante from the 1940s—emphasized the importance of putting the proper amount of effort into one’s attire: “If you’re at a very very formal ball, I think that the way you dress determines your actions. The more run down you put on, the sloppier you act.” In this way, cultural capital—and the group belonging it indicates—is displayed at the deb ball through one’s social behaviors and physical appearance.

One element of cultural capital that I, as well as other debutantes I spoke with, have found intriguing, though, is that of the behavior that accompanies drunkenness. The issue of

underage drinking and the pervasiveness of intoxication at deb events, as I stated earlier, emerged all throughout the data. Multiple times, participants expressed confusion over why and how excessive consumption of alcohol fits in so widely with debutante culture. For example, assistant marshal Alex complained: “It’s a time to be classy, and there were girls there just being gross.” Once again, we see the word “classy” being used to describe expectations of debutante behavior. Similar to Alex, Nate, the brother of a debutante, grappled with this seemingly contradictory relationship between alcohol and deb culture:

It’s funny, [drinking] being part of it. It’s like, this is the deb ball...[laughter] You know, once again the weird tension between like—like drunkenness being a part of going to this elite party. I mean, going to this like, this is supposed to be the upper echelon of the south and all you do is get drunk. It just, it doesn’t really line up, you know? I guess when you think of ante-bellum, the original southern families, you think of really proper, keeping English roots, being really polite. But it really just turned into a lot of white people getting really trashed and probably talking about, you know, whatever land they own...

Here Nate describes the relationship between these two cultures as a “tension,” implying that something about the behavioral knowledge necessary for debutante inclusion does not fit well with the practice of excessive drinking and getting “trashed.” As I found, however, a culture of drunkenness does, indeed, accompany expectations for debutante behavior. This is evidenced by the sheer magnitude of underage drinking and intoxication present at deb events, as explained to me by nearly all insiders I spoke with. In describing the role of alcohol in the debutante process, many interviewees described alcohol consumption as an “expectation” of participation.

For example, Amanda—a mother of two debutantes—told me:

For other families, I think [the role of alcohol] is huge. I think that other families expect their children to drink and get drunk that weekend, and they condone it by helping them buy alcohol, they condone it by watching them drink alcohol in their hotel room. And I think that a lot of people think that’s a part of the whole rite of passage and you know, they have no problem with it. ...A lot of parents did it themselves and so they feel like, you know, that’s part of growing up, doing all that, so they just let it happen.

Here Amanda shows how drunkenness is perceived by a portion of the debutante population to be inherent in the very process of children becoming adults. This further supports my aforementioned hypothesis that one reason why nineteen year-olds might be more inclined

than twenty-one year-olds to participate is the prospect of being able to underage drink.

Furthermore, her guess that parents think that their children should be able to drink since they themselves drank at nineteen was echoed by the former Terpsichorean member I spoke with. For example, Gordon described to me how the change in drinking age has caused some of the deb events to lose their original appeal:

R: [The Saturday morning dance] hasn't become as much fun now for the kids, but we had two bands there, and it was the Terps club members and their wives and the debbs and their dates, it was, I just thought it was a fun time.

I: Why do you say that it's not as fun now, you feel like?

R: Well, it's probably...it's probably the alcohol [laughter]. I mean, the debbs and their dates can't just have a couple of beers and have fun, and I think they're a little more stiff than, uh [pause] than they would have been in the old days.

Gordon's lamenting of the way in which deb events have become less "fun" due to the restriction of alcohol consumption reveals that drinking alcohol has, for several decades, been understood as an integral component to the debutante experience. Therefore, contrary to popular confusion of how these two cultures could coexist within deb events, I found the practice of consuming alcohol to actually be in line with debutante society's understanding of cultural capital. In this way, drunkenness, I learned, was an expected, or, at the very least, not unpredictable, consequence of debutante involvement, and may even act as a form of displaying cultural capital, as the debutante process clearly embraces a culture of alcohol consumption.

In the next and final section, I discuss how the exclusive nature of the debutante ritual solidifies social boundaries and enables the group to maintain elite status within certain families—a process that is carried out by (re)connecting new members of the next elite generation.

Shared fun for debbs and parents: passing down elite status via (re)connections and partying

I think for my parents also getting to reconnect with the people who have done it in the past as well. So like their daughters are doing it now, so they get reunited then and it's that sort of community.—participant Emily

[There is a] debutante ball rhetoric and self-conception, which is ‘we are the south, this is our community, this is how we treat our elite, this is how we reproduce our elite.’—assistant marshal Henry

Many debutantes I spoke with, as well as debutantes’ parents, articulated that the events were fun not only for the debutantes and their dates, but for the parents, as well. Participants spoke about their parents reconnecting with old friends (one debutante even told me that her mom saw her own past assistant marshal at the debutante ball), saying that they felt like their parents knew more people at the ball than they themselves knew. This seemed to reiterate that debutante participation was, in reality, more reflective of parents’ social circles than the individual accomplishments and desires of the debutante women themselves. Indeed, I found that often parents were eager to introduce their children to their friends and their friends’ children during the events, and several debutantes understood this to be part of the overall debutante process. As some interviewees told me, this felt like the first time that parents’ social circles and children’s social circles were colliding in such a way that everyone at the events was treated with the same status as grown-ups, rather than being so strictly separated by adults and children.

Amanda, mother of two debutantes, spoke to this point when she told me that this is one feature of the debutante process that she found valuable for her own children:

It’s a good time for kids to sort of bridge that gap between being a kid and being an adult, because it’s a weekend that’s mixed, kids are mixed with adults the whole weekend, so, you know, I think it’s just a good training ground for making introductions to people, speaking to people you don’t know, introducing people to other people that they don’t know. So I think it’s a good [pause] like a social boot camp almost [laughter], you know, and I think that would be valuable for anybody, whether it had to be that setting or not.

Amanda’s explanation shows how the debutante process acts as a coming-of-age ritual for young people, where they are socialized into current elite adult circles. Part of this procedure of assimilation, I found, was partying. As I have explained in previous sections, alcohol consumption plays a large role in deb events, and many interviewees felt that parents, at best, would turn a blind eye to this practice, because drinking is considered a part of the rite of passage of debutante participation. Indeed, Amanda told me, as mentioned previously, that

parents would go so far as to provide their children with alcohol, because the parents themselves engaged in such behavior when they were nineteen, and so, the logic goes, now it is their children's turn. Participant Hillary seemed to agree with Amanda's perspective on parents' attitudes toward drinking when she explained to me: "I knew that this was [laughter] supposedly a nice event, and just friends and family having fun, like this was not like a college frat party. But some people, their parents got them a room at the [hotel name] where the party was beforehand and provided the alcohol and provided them a place to drink, and then those people were the ones who had to go to that time-out room, or whatever. And some of the parents were drunk..."

Despite Hillary's claims that "this was not a college frat party," I found throughout the data that deb events often were likened to Greek events and, indeed, even functioned as sites for gathering Greek participants from across the state and across generations. I was told from both parents and debutantes that parents enjoyed reconnecting with old friends from college, such as past fraternity brothers and sorority sisters. For example, Amanda told me: "I had a great time. I saw lots of people that I knew from here and also that I knew in college and it's like a little reunion, so that was lots of fun." In this way, both parents and debutante participants are getting together with friends within their own social circles, which served to further strengthen pre-existing ties and reinforce group belonging. The mixed presence of debutantes and adults as social equals was, however, a new experience about which some interviewees expressed initial uneasiness. For example, Megan described: "It was like a college party with your parents watching, kind of, it was like—I don't know, it did make it uncomfortable at times."

For many debutantes, part of what made the events seem like college parties was, as I have explained, the sweeping presence of alcohol. Although the Terpsichorean Club would not

go as far as to openly provide alcohol for underage drinkers, the parents, as I have mentioned, often would step in and act as providers, so that, despite the events technically being dry, alcohol consumption was the norm. I learned though that not only were parents securing participants' alcohol supply, but often they themselves were enjoying consumption. In this way, it seems like part of the way in which parents pass elite adult status onto their children in this coming-of-age ritual is through inclusion into adult activities such as partying. Indeed, several participants, such as Hillary, told me that parents were drinking right alongside debs—something that participant Meredith also articulated: “It seemed to me that the parents were the ones that were super wasted ... I mean I've always thought that, because I'm like, why would my dad keep going back to the parties even when me and my sister aren't debutantes?” Meredith's observation about parents' partying practices shows how the debutante ball provides a space for parents and their children to come together—perhaps for the first time in such a setting—as adults sharing in fun together, rather than within a dichotomous parent-child relationship. Therefore, I found alcohol consumption, largely understood by interviewees as a rite of passage despite the underage position of participants, is as a cultural norm within the deb community that acts as a way to pass adult status onto children.

These social functions of the debutante ball—to connect parents' children to other parents' children as they become recognized as adults through social events that involve adult activities—work to pass not only grown-up status onto participants, but also to ensure that kids get (re)connected with the “right” people. Since social capital is so highly associated with the debutante process, as inclusion is based on social circles and the title of “debutante” is understood in the South to connote “high society,” parents have a vested interest in making sure that social connections with certain elite and wealthy families in the state stay intact throughout

the following generation. For example, recall my discussion on how ambivalent/resisting debutantes felt pulled out of their new college identity to rejoin a culture that they had sought to distance themselves from. In this way, I found, the timing of the debutante process as after a daughter's first year of college works to ensure that she does not stray too far from her upbringing, but continues to strengthen prior connections within her families' social culture. All of this, then—the hegemonic process of pressuring a daughter to participate in the debutante ritual using both consent and coercion—is for the purpose of controlling children's societal path in the “right” direction, so that economic, social, and cultural capital, and, consequentially, elite status, can be passed down from parents to their children through a visible coming-of-age ritual. In this way, families maintain their belonging in an elite social circle, working to uphold group boundaries that distinguish certain families as upper-class citizens economically, socially, and culturally.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results drawn from the twenty-two semi-structured in-depth interviews I conducted with debutante insiders—such as participating debutantes, a declining debutante, assistant marshals, family members of debutantes, and a Terpsichorean member—shine light on how and why the debutante ball continues in North Carolina in 2015. As I have shown, seldom do debutante participants fully desire and enjoy all elements of the debutante ritual. Indeed, the presentation ceremony—upheld and understood as the culminating event of the process—was only described by one participating deb as a somewhat positive experience. Furthermore, I found that few participating debutantes felt that they were present by an autonomous decision-making process or felt that their participation was fully enthusiastic. Even though debutantes felt they had to sacrifice something for participation, whether it was comfort during the presentation

ceremony or their own identity/principles, every debutante I spoke with described gains from participation in one or more areas of pleasing family, spending time with friends, and having fun. In this way, I found, elements of both coercion (giving something up) and consent (gaining something in return) are present in the continuation of the debutante ritual.

Drawing from Antonio Gramsci's work on the hegemony of power structures, then, I have argued that the use of both consent and coercion in ensuring debutante participation and continuation constitutes the tradition as a hegemonic process. This means that insiders do not question the meaning or purpose of the ritual, because consent and coercion give the illusion that the process is commonsensical and that participation is the result of free will. For example, as I demonstrated, there were contradictory explanations throughout the data as to what the debutante ball truly means or does, and many participants were considering this question for the first time during our interview.

Such a hegemonic process that requires both consent and coercion is employed by debutante insiders and organizers, I argue, because families have a vested interest in displaying and protecting economic, social, and cultural capital within their families to legitimate elite group belonging in contrast to other non-elite, non-belonging families. This is ensured by passing down elite status to children via a coming-of-age ritual that congratulates young people as new adults and connects them with the "right" social circles. Although often the debutantes themselves have little desire to be "presented to society" and, indeed, feel that they did not gain anything from participation, parents and families are the ones who benefit from their daughters' debut, because their daughters' status as debutantes reaffirm and guarantee the continuation of their own socioeconomic success. In this way, the debutante process works to disregard individual women's identity and instead homogenizes the group of debutantes into status

symbols to display their families' economic, social, and cultural capital. This process is maintained only within certain families in North Carolina—white, affluent families—so that capital, and, consequentially, elite status and power, continues to be concentrated within the same families, rather than dispersed throughout new, non-white, non-affluent families.

In the future, it would be beneficial for current scholarship on protection of capital and maintenance of group boundaries if a more longitudinal study of participating debutante women were employed. For example, several debutante interviewees wondered out loud during our interview as to whether or not our parents' generation had felt similarly to our generation concerning deb participating when they were nineteen. If parents seemed enthusiastic for their daughters to participate, yet not all debutantes identified as fully enthusiastic, has there been a shift in participant willingness between generations? Or will these same ambivalent and partially resistant debutante women find themselves enthusiastically pressuring their daughters to make their debut? Answering this question would involve studying at what point participants, after gaining elite adult status through belonging in debutante culture, recognize the value of the capital they have received and the necessity of protecting and reproducing such capital and elite group belonging. Therefore it would be beneficial for future research to, for example, contact these same participants when they have children to study their rationalization of whether or not they want their children to participate in debutante culture, either as debutantes or assistant marshals.

Additionally, it would be interesting to address the following questions in future research on the North Carolina debutante ball: does the continuation of the ritual contribute to the maintenance of marriages within certain social circles, and if so, how? What comparisons may be made between debutante balls within white, affluent communities and similar events, such as

debutante balls and quinceañeras, within communities of color in North Carolina? Several times throughout interviews, participants would explain that inclusion in debutante culture has to do with long-standing ties to the state. However, I found that some participants had only lived in North Carolina for a few years prior to inclusion in deb society. It would be interesting, then, to uncover statistics on families' regional connections, including length of time spent in North Carolina, to evaluate whether or not such claims for criteria are true. Such an endeavor would be tricky, however, as documents concerning participants' demographics are either not kept or are highly protected and would therefore be difficult for a researcher to access.

Furthermore, this study did not exhaustively examine the implications of gender and race involved in the debutante tradition, but rather focused mainly on the reproduction of socioeconomic class. One question that would be valuable to answer, then, is how does nostalgia for the antebellum South—in all its cultural ideas about the place of women, people of color, and low-income families—contribute to the continuation of debutante culture and a desire for group members to reproduce their elite status? Future research should also explore more what consequences the rhetoric of being “presented to society” has on the future of these women's lives. For example, are there trends in how debutante women organize their domestic and/or work lives later in life? What is the average age of marriage for debutante women? Additionally, future research should examine the North Carolina debutante ball's relationship with issues of race within North Carolina. How do debutante participants understand race relations within their own communities? How does debutante participation contribute to racial segregation within North Carolina? Have there been instances in which families of color are invited to partake, as some interviewees claimed? How did this inclusion occur, and how was the presence of people of color perceived and received by white participants? What decision-making processes did such

families of color experience in determining participation? Furthermore, although this research study looked at families and participating women, future research should also pay close attention to the role of the Terpsichorean Club in continuing the debutante ritual in North Carolina. Indeed, an entire research project could be devoted to the organization and maintenance of this club in and of itself, as its function extends beyond the debutante ball and into other areas of North Carolina's social, economic, and professional organization.

Any study on debutante culture can be taken in many different directions, as the ritual acts as a site of many intersecting societal phenomena. This research project, however, has addressed the question of continuation, looking specifically at participant motivation and insider rationalization. Compiling this data was made possible with the help of the twenty-two interviewees who contributed to this research project, as well as with the advantage of my own status as a debutante insider, which enabled me to access participants more easily. My personal background as a past debutante also allowed me to bypass surface-leveled questions of "who, what, and where" and look more deeply at the questions of "how and why" the ritual exists in North Carolina today.

This research is unique because it examines the process of insider rationalization and hegemonic continuity that allows the debutante ball to not only survive, but, indeed, to thrive in North Carolina to this day. My hope is that this work contributes to dialogue—or, indeed, merely begins dialogue—on debutante participation, not only from an outside, sociological perspective, but also for past participants who are seeking understanding of their own experience in debutante culture. I hope that, whereas participants have been discouraged from discussing and questioning their place in debutante culture, young women and their families begin to think more critically about why such pressure is put on prospective debutantes, utilizing both coercion and consent. I

hope that group insiders also begin to engage in dialogue in considering how the ritual de-individualized and homogenizes women into mere objects to display families' economic, social, and cultural capital as a way to prove group belonging in contrast to less elite families.

Additionally, I hope that participants think more critically in the future about the ways in which they have distanced themselves from the elitism and exclusion involved in debutante culture and realize that participation in the process does, indeed, uphold an institution that works to maintain problematic divisions in race, class, and gender. Such difference-blind participation further creates an illusion of legitimate group boundaries by taking divisions as commonsensical, rather than acknowledging the significance of the boundaries drawn around group belonging in debutante culture and grappling with the consequences.

It is also my hope that this research enhances sociological scholarship on the protection and accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital and how these forms of societal advantages are used to maintain social boundaries via display to other group members. Indeed, I believe that uncovering the hegemonic processes that occur to ensure the continuation of the debutante ball will contribute to Lamont and Molnár's work on the utilization of symbolic boundaries to uphold social boundaries by showing how these symbolic boundaries are rationalized by insiders. Studying the debutante ball, then, as I have shown, is an important contribution in sociologically evaluating how the current structure of our society and all its divisions in race, class, and gender, particularly within the South, are upheld through group consent, coercion, and participation. The debutante ball is one such hegemonic ritual and cultural custom in our society that works to maintain group boundaries whose borders, rather than being neutral or arbitrary, are charged with real economic, social, and cultural capital, which, in a capitalist society, translates to power and advantage.

I have addressed the question of what, precisely, allows the debutante ball to continue to thrive in North Carolina to this day, looking at participant motivations and insider rationalizations. I sought to discover what participant women think of their own position in debutante culture, and found that the process that ensures the continuation of the ritual is a hegemonic one that requires both consent and coercion and, as a result, the purpose of the ball goes largely unquestioned. Parents and families who want to protect capital and maintain social boundaries desire inclusion in debutante culture and consequentially pressure their daughters into participation. Their daughters' status as debutantes, then, works to reaffirm their families' place in society and to display, as well as guarantee further accumulation of, their families' economic, social, and cultural capital—a process that, in capitalist America, contributes to inequality of the distribution of capital and, consequentially, socioeconomic stratification within states such as North Carolina.

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