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The Effect of Social Class on My Life

My parents’ yearly income, combined, falls somewhere in the mid six-figure range. According to *Society: The Basics*, that means that my family falls into the category of “Lower-Uppers,” i.e. the “working rich,” who have achieved wealth through working rather than by inheriting it from previous generation. The book notes that “These ‘new rich’ families— who make up 3 to 4 percent of the U.S. population— generally live in large homes in expensive neighborhoods… and send their children to private schools and good colleges. Yet most do not gain entry into the clubs and associations of “old money” families (Macionis 2013). This passage describes my experience to a tee: I went to a private high school and I now attend a private college, but my family didn’t have a membership at either of the swanky country clubs in my home town, and we didn’t rub shoulders much with the “old-money” families, even though some those families had children who attended my high school. The Macionis text also brings up the idea of occupational prestige. My dad is a mechanic, which ranks in the lower third of careers in terms of prestige according to Table 1 on page 218 of *Society: The Basics*, but my mom is a doctor, which is the top-ranked profession according to that same chart. I’m also on pace to graduate from college, which is more unusual than I realized: as of 2011, only 29.6 percent of women and 30.3 percent of men in America had a college degree (Macionis 2013).

The Macionis text also provides some global context for my situation. According to the book, the United States is a “high-income country”, i.e. a country in which the industrial revolution first took place more than two hundred years ago. The text also notes that “high-income countries are the most advantaged, with 75 percent of global income supporting just 23 percent of humanity” (Macionis 2013). Because I grew up in a high-income nation, I had a wealth of advantages in my childhood compared to kids in low-income nations. On a very fundamental level, I had enough food to eat, which is statistically attributable to my being born in a high-income nation — according to Macionis, the average adult in the United States consumes about 1600 calories more than the average adult in a low-income country in addition to doing less physical labor. I also didn’t have to worry about the hardships brought on by illiteracy, warfare, or slavery. Instead, I was able to focus on school with the eventual goal of attending college, which would give me another advantage over most citizens in low-income nations. It’s possible that if I was born in a low-income nation that I might still have had the opportunity to focus on school and pursue a college degree, but it’s much less likely.

*Society: The Basics* addresses more than just definitions of different classes in America and in the world— it also describes the effect class membership has on individuals. The first effect that the book describes is that the wealthy tend to have better health than the poor, because “they eat more nutritious food, live in safer and less stressful environments, and receive better medical care” (Macionis 2013). Again, the book’s description reflects my own experiences: my family regularly bought fresh fruits and vegetables from stores like Whole Foods, and we lived in a safe neighborhood, which meant we never had to worry about our physical situation. My family’s political views also mirror those described by the book as the prevailing views among the well-off: my parents are fiscally conservative but socially liberal. I’m not sure of the exact degree to which their political views have rubbed off on me, (I tend to lean to the left of my parents on most issues), but I’m certain that their philosophies have impacted mine substantially, and through them, my social class has influenced me.

In addition to the health benefits and political views conferred to me by my social class, there are also myriad social benefits to being a member of the upper class of America. As described in “The Saints and the Roughnecks,” upper-class children receive preferential treatment from authority compared to their lower-class peers. This fact wasn’t especially relevant to me specifically because I was a rule-abiding kid, but some of my classmates certainly took advantage of it. For example, during my junior year of high school, several fellow juniors were caught shooting cars with paintball guns. Still, because they were, like the saints of the article, upper-class kids, they faced no serious consequences. They had to pay the kids whose cars they had defaced and they were reprimanded by our school, but no charges were pressed against them for vandalism or assault, and their trajectory through the school system remained unchanged. As “The Saints and the Roughnecks” explains, they faced few serious consequences for their actions because upper-class kids who display deviant behavior receive a different type of reinforcement than their lower-class peers who behave in the same way. In the case of the boys at my school, they didn’t receive any sanctions from the law that might have branded them deviants in the long term, and the authority figures in their lives maintained the same expectations for the boys that they’d had before the incident: that the boys would continue with school, attend college, and “make something of themselves.” And those teachers’ expectations were borne out: like the saints from the article, all the classmates mentioned here went to college. As I mentioned, I was never one to take advantage of opportunities for deviance, but as the situation I’ve described demonstrates, I certainly had the opportunity to without serious consequences. I know for a fact that if I wanted to, for example, drink or do drugs in high school (and most likely even if I’d wanted to deviate more significantly), I could have without being branded a deviant. There existed a safety net for me, and corresponding degree of freedom, that lower-class kids didn’t have. And that’s the prevailing theme I’ve found in my investigation of the effects my social class has had on my life: that being born in the upper class of a high-income nation means freedom. More specifically, it’s granted me freedom to pursue schooling and my interests without worrying about my situation and surroundings, and freedom to live without the fear of being labelled a deviant even if I want to behave in deviant ways.

References

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Chambliss, William J. “The Saints and the Roughnecks.” Pp. 314-327 in *Readings for Sociology*, edited by Garth Massey. New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.