Deflecting Privilege

1201 (White man, Father = academic, St Mary’s School, Cambridge, No Clubs, Barrister)

**PARTICIPANT 1:** Well a slight fish out of water, because it was quite clear that for a lot of the activities that were around they – [coughs] sporting activities in particular. I'm not really much of a sportsman, but you know, I might have considered rowing. But actually, it became quite evident that the various societies were only interested in people who had already done that activity at school. And I had been at a school that didn't offer anything other than the basics, like football and rugby, and that was about it, or cricket. And I wasn't really interested in those. So I think that part of the problem was that there was quite a strong kind of expectation or implication that undergraduates came from schools at the kind of the posher end of what was on offer. And I think that the contemporaries that I knew – not all of them actually came from public schools – grammar schools, yes. But it was either grammar schools or public schools, but the kind of the people I knew, it more grammar school than public school. On the other hand, there were other elements, groups, which were so public school that it was beyond belief.

[00:15:11]

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, that's interesting. Okay. So that – you felt some distinction or some differences in terms of class, perhaps in terms of your peers?

**PARTICIPANT 1:** Yes. Well, social background. It depends on what you mean by an understanding of class. But anyway, but it was definitely differences in social background. Yeah.

[00:15:36]

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. I mean, maybe – you just mentioned, it depends what you mean by social class? Is that – what class did you understand yourself to be when you arrived at university?

**PARTICIPANT 1:** I can't – I would probably have said that I was middle class. I think yes. You see, at the time, I was interested in politics. So I would have asked myself the question. And I think that I would come up with the answer that I was middle class. Definitely so.

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**PARTICIPANT 1:** They went to the local Catholic primary school – a state school – and the local Catholic primary school is actually a good school. But we felt that apart from the fact that it was convenient and local and a good school, it also meant that they would rub along with people from different backgrounds. The primary school has, I think still, about maybe 50% of the children are from immigrant families. And, again, about 50% is non-white. It's not middle class. But I think that the alternative was to send them to a private school. And that's what virtually everybody in our street did. But we weren't really too happy about that, because it's a form of social segregation that I don't think is, is really a good thing.

[00:50:59]

**PARTICIPANT 1:** On the other hand, when it came to secondary school, they both ended up at my wife's old boarding school. And that was largely because the eldest daughter expressed an interest in going to boarding school, I don't quite know why. But we ended – and therefore, as she was at that school, the younger one also was quite interested in going to that school. So they therefore, left the public sector went to the private sector. The boarding school in question was not a particularly prestigious school, and therefore it was used to dealing with children of varying abilities. And that meant that it was actually quite a friendly school. So they did our – both of our daughters quite well.

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**PARTICIPANT 1:** Well, we live in Islington. And the street we live in is – has houses that are sort of mid-Victorian houses, well, mid-Victorian, 1850, 1860. Now, they're almost all owned by very well-heeled people. In the middle of one side of the street are still some council owned flats. But everybody, apart from a few people, everybody in the street is middle class, and well-heeled. I mean, this is sort of banker territory, and lawyers and architects and stuff like that. Around the corner, and actually, from where I'm sitting, I can see it, you pass into a different world. And you pass into the world of people who are leading more of a marginal existence. And again, an indication is the primary school that the children went to. So you've – it's a classical, Islington thing, because the thing about Islington is that you have these huge extremes between very wealthy people and very poor people. So you've got that around here.

1202 White man, Father = GP, Radley College, Cambridge, No Clubs, Academic

[00:27:15]

**INTERVIEWER:** Interesting. And it sounds like, I mean I suppose I’ll move onto your career and how that fed into it in a moment. You talked about how there was some continuity between boarding school and university. Were there any fish out of water moments for you, or did you feel quite at home starting at that institution?

**PARTICIPANT:** Well I think I felt, I felt, I mean as I said it was, yeah like having women there was the different thing, and I remember, you know, so for most of my adolescence I would’ve, you know, thought, oh will I ever have a girlfriend? Well my dad had a girlfriend. And why, you know, all those sorts of thoughts. And then as soon as I got to Cambridge, I think at the end of the first term I started a relationship with a woman in the year above, and therefore I thought, oh, you know, that’s good, that’s great. She’s lovely. And so that’s the, and that felt like normality, and I remember, you know, that lasted for about a year, and I remember that ended and I thought, oh well that’s it, I’ll never have another girlfriend, and then I did, and, you know, and throughout my life I think I’ve felt, oh that’s, it’s not being disabled that’s the problem, you know, that’s fine. I suppose, you know, fish out of water, there’s that sense in which you’re a left-wing student and you espouse left-wing ideas and yet you went to private school. So, you know, that’s, that was an embarrassment, or a, yeah it’s obviously privilege but it’s something to disown or something to be aware of or, yeah.

1210 (South Asia woman, Father = Civil engineer, New Delhi Public School, City of London Polytechnic, No club, headteacher)

**PARTICIPANT 1:** Okay, so I suppose the caste system in India. My father was of the highest caste, after [00:14:40] [Missed], which are the priests. But my mother, because she wasn't a Hindu, the children, my brothers and I, we were of the lowest caste. Because my mother wasn't of the same religion as my dad. So, I would say that in India, we were extremely wealthy. Because in those days, you were either very rich or very poor. There was no middle class in India then. So, I suppose, according to the British way, we'd have been upper class.

[00:15:07]

**PARTICIPANT 1:**When we came here, to England, I would say we had to start from scratch again, I would say that we were middle class, lower middle class. And I would probably say that if I was being pushed, I would say middle class, whereas my husband who's English, his father is what I'd call a toff. And he spoke like that, and whenever you saw him, he had a bottle of wine in one hand, and a cigarette in his mouth, be it 10 o'clock in the morning or 10 o'clock at night. He was a major in the army, lived in a great big house in Tunbridge Wells with 30 bedrooms. Upstairs, downstairs kind of existence. So very, very different lifestyles.

1216 (Asian (Iranian) man, Father = unemployed, King’s Coll. School, Wimbledon, Univ. of Leeds, No club, Diplomat)

(03:24)

**INTERVIEWER:** Not a problem at all. So, the first question I have is purposefully very open. Could you describe the neighbourhood where you grew up?

(03:31)

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah, the East Sheen, which is southwest London. So, it's the affluent middle-class neighbourhood in southwest London. Very kind of London posh, which is a bit different to kind of countryside posh. I guess we'll come on to schooling because I went to a private day school in London, which again, is a posh school, so to speak, but not kind of countryside levels.

**(& later in the interview.....)**

So, even though we grew up in this wealthy bubble, in middle class, I went to a posh day school, we never really had the financial capital. But you kind of, I never really felt it. I mean, I guess I was around people who are obviously much richer than me, but I was given the privilege of living in that world, if that makes sense.

(07:34)

I realised I was living in an affluent world, even though we were not, you know, judging by our bank balances and affluent family, if that makes sense.

(07:44)

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. That's an interesting trajectory. And can I ask about your grandparents as well and their occupations?

(07:53)

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah. So, I should also say that, I mean, this is a funny thing. So, my grandfather was a general and very wealthy. And he moved to, and so, my mum's family are extremely wealthy; were extremely wealthy.

(08:09)

He moved, he bought some properties in Kensington in the 50s, because he saw a future in London. And so, he bought big detached houses, and they bought a flat in Kensington; the house costed £8,000 and the flat costs £2,000. They've got the deeds, which is that yeah, it's incredible, because the house now is about, what, we sold in the 70s.

(08:32)

But the house now is about £30 million because it's a huge detached house, just off Kensington high street. And the flat, where my grandmother lived until she passed away in 2014, was a five-bedroom flat in Kensington, which they bought for £2,000 which the family sold. But the problem is that let the lease run down, so, in terms of what should have been a £6-7 million job, with the lease rundown all the way to sort of six years, and the broader family have no money to renew the lease.

(09:08)

Plus, for what it's worth, my uncle is, it’s gonna sound badly, is kind of communist at heart; he was quite happy for there not to be wealth passing down because it wouldn't have fit within his principles. And he's head of the family. So, he happily paid the 40% inheritance tax and didn't want to renew the lease because he has principled position on that level of wealth not passing through generations, and rather give it to state.

(09:35)

So, point being is from a very wealthy, and my mother grew up in Kensington and I spent lots of years in Kensington because I lived with my grandparents. Again, it was in this kind of elite bubble that we ourselves and my grandparents never invested the money.

(09:52)

So, from the 50s and 60s when I moved to the UK, they slowly sold properties, and the money basically sat in the accounts, and never really reinvested. So, as that often happens, the money didn't pass down generations.

(10:05)

But I say all of that not because there's any begrudging this on my part, because I was very lucky, I had a wonderful family, I had a stable home, so the money side of it really never bothers me. But I say it because I think if you look at it from the exterior, I came up through a very privileged, but it wasn't quite manifested in in actual capital.

1217 (South Asia woman, Father = GP, Olchfa Comprehensive School, Cambridge, Cambridge, Clubs = House of St Barnabas, Barrister)

[0:09:24.6]

**P:** So, we had the perfect environment for studying at home, studying was given a very significant status, but we also had sports. It was not the case that my parents put any pressure on us, but they, we knew that we were expected to study, so, if I didn’t do my homework my mother would be absolutely appalled.

[0:09:53.8]

**P:** She wouldn’t have understood why I would not have done my homework, it would make no sense to her, and we were encouraged to do other things, pretty much we were given what we wanted so, it was a very… I never felt any deprivation growing up, although you know, I’m sure there were people who were wealthier than us, but I never felt any deprivation, about doing sports, going riding, going on trips, all schools materials, any books I wanted were bought, so there was no sense of lacking money on that, that said I never went abroad as on holidays as a child [0:10:42.3]. That wasn’t something I even noticed. So, we didn’t go abroad on holidays.

[0:10:52.5]

**INTERVIEWER:** Right, so real academic emphasis and in terms of the hobbies that you wanted to pursue, that was all encouraged, and could you talk a bit more about that, in terms of extracurricular activities? What did you take part in?

**PARTICIPANT:** Well, I played tennis, largely because my brother played tennis and my parents had played tennis and they liked tennis, I didn’t really like it that much but I was really into horse riding and I rode horses from about the age of four and eventually had my own pony and then I had another pony after that, again, in Wales having a pony is… It’s just not that posh [laughs].

**P:** It’s just so much cheaper, or it was at the time, quite a lot of people whose wealth was minimal would have a pony, and the pony would live out in a field and they would pop along to pony club and it was all just not, not the way in which horse-riding is now, and I had riding lessons twice a week. It wasn’t that costly, and my mother would drive there. My mother and my father both had cars, my mum did a part time job, she went back to working as a medical secretary.

1226 (Carribean (Barbados) woman, Father = factory worker, a secondary modern school, Poly. of North London, No clubs, Headteacher)

**PARTICIPANT 1:** Socially, mentally, I feel classless to be honest. I feel classless. I'm not working class, because working class is like white people, middle class are white people, upper class are white people. That's how I see it. I feel as though I don't have a class. But it's not a negative. I don't feel bad about it. I just don't have a class.

[01:35:38]

1227 (Carribean woman, Father = academic, Queen's High School, Cambridge, No clubs, Playwright)

[1:04:33.9]

**INTERVIEWER:** And you mentioned growing up in a middle class Jamaican neighbourhood. Do you feel like you’ve experienced social mobility in relation to your parents, or do you feel like you’ve had roughly a similar career trajectory?

**PARTICIPANT:** Oh no no no no, I mean as soon as you’re Black in the UK you’re working class, and it was automatically assumed that’s what I would be. And I think in terms of finances and earning, I think that’s basically where I’ve landed up.

[1:04:55.3]

**P:** You know, I’m not, I have a little flat in London but I only own a little bit of it, it’s, I don’t have, I look around at my contemporaries from university and they have financially very very different lives, and I don’t think I’ve done badly, but I certainly haven’t done, you know, I’m certainly not part, if I’d stayed or if I’d worked all the way through here and probably married somebody here, I would have had a very different life, I think. But I’m, yeah, I’m so socially, culturally, maybe mentally I’m part of a sort of artistic lower middle class kind of thing, but my actual situation and the way I’m seen by an awful lot of people is essentially as working class.

[1:05:36.0]

**P:** Although I was told off once when I went to write for something called *Babyfather* with the BBC, that I wasn’t working class enough, so it’s a strange, you come into this society as Black and you don’t have the money to buy your way into, you’re automatically seen as working class?

[1:05:54.3]

**P:** But then I open my mouth and I’m at Cambridge, so I’m, I love that word ‘liminal’? I’m sort of, not quite anything, which is discombobulating but it also gives you a freedom to move between things, so, to move between the British Museum and a tiny flat in London, so. Yeah.

[1:06:16.5]

**P:** It’s, I’m not, I bobble about. [laughs] That’s what it is. I bobble about.