The Meaning of Upper Class

2

In social science literature and in popular belief, it is often suggested that socioeconomic class is of little interest or importance to people in everyday life in the United States. Studies of class consciousness often conclude that they are not particularly aware of the importance of class position, nor do they live or define their lives within class contexts.[1] Socioeconomic classes are seen as not entirely real for Americans, except as constructs for social scientific analysis.[2]

I expected, therefore, that it might be difficult to interview specific respondents about the meaning of their socioeconomic position—even knowing that studies have also shown the upper class and upper-class women, in particular, to be the most class-conscious segment of the American population.[3] I need not have worried. The women I interviewed spoke easily and articulately about the upper class and how it frames their lives. Furthermore, the ways they defined and described their class were quite different from the

ways social scientists typically study class in American society. These conversations thus provided insights into the concept of class as it is experienced by upper-class people in everyday life—and they set the scene for the remainder of this study.

Personal meanings

Social scientists often use measures of occupation, income, and education to assess class position and to study social class in society. The social class of a woman is most frequently established by her husband's position according to these measures.[4] For the upper-class women with whom I spoke, however, these dimensions of socioeconomic class had little meaning. When they spontaneously spoke of themselves or others as members of the upper class and in relation to the community, they rarely spoke of income, education, or their husbands' occupations. The few women who did speak of these matters were the exceptions.

Mrs. Bennett, for example, described the meaning of upper class as being the "head of big [business] concerns." Mrs. Hoight (whose husband is an independent management consultant with his office in their home) said, "Social class is a certain income level, a certain education, and a prominent position in the community in terms of what your husband does." Mrs. Harper (whose husband is a partner in one of the oldest law firms in the city) said: "We're successful people, people at my income level. My husband's father was considered to be one of the top lawyers in the city." Mrs. Appleton (whose husband heads a firm that he inherited from his family) called the term upper class a "snob term," but went on to say, "If it's used realistically in terms of income, I guess it's alright."

To these women, who rarely have paid occupations from which to derive an independent class identity, the husband's position is not of much importance. Certainly, upper-class men must

continue to have well-paying and high positions in, for instance, business or corporate law in order to exercise economic power; but those positions are not considered to be major criteria for class membership. They are the taken-for-granted consequence of other more salient characteristics. How, then, do upper-class women define themselves and their class?

First of all, according to the women interviewed, people are *born* into the upper class. The importance of birthright was evident when the women chose other subjects for me to talk with. The appropriate subjects were considered to be class equals. They were chosen on the basis of their family names and lineages, and by virtue of the contributions made by their parents and grandparents to the community. When the women talked about the meaning of class, they mentioned their ancestry, heritage, and breeding—of "being from an old line family" or "being born like we are." Mrs. Wainwright, for example, was told she was "well born": "Mother didn't mean well born in America. She meant before you got here from Europe—landed aristocracy."

Many of the women spoke with pride of their ancestors who had been founders of the city: streets, parks, buildings, and institutions in the arts, social services, and education carried their names. They sometimes mentioned what generation they were, often fourth or fifth. Mrs. Martin spoke of her concern that the old families were being outnumbered, that her social circle included people who were not city natives: "My mother and grandmother were born here, so was my father and his father. There aren't so many of us anymore. Today you run into so many people who were born in other cities."

But what about those members of the upper class who are not of the oldest stock—those who belong to the right clubs, go to the right schools, and eventually get themselves or their children listed in the local social register, but are not from the first families? Upper-class "newcomers" have often moved to a particular city

from another geographical area. Less frequently, they are carefully selected members of families of new wealth and power who are brought into upper-class social circles. Mrs. Nesbitt, for example, has ostensibly been completely accepted by the community's old upper class since her move from another city. She is a woman in her sixties whose husband heads a large national firm. She and her husband are listed in the social register, and they are members of the oldest and most exclusive club. She said however: "[The old families] will always look at me as an outsider. They've been very kind in their way, but I'll always be an outsider. They've always gone with the same people, and they talk about people I don't know. Their lives are ingrown."

Mrs. Atherton (whose husband heads the city's most prestigious accounting firm) is, like Mrs. Nesbitt, in the social register and the city's oldest club. She also has felt like an outsider since her move to town and implied that the old-line families were narrow in their social contacts: "I don't have high social standing compared to the Spears or the Brownleys. I like to associate with different groups of people. I've always felt a little strange when people start talking about people they went to school with because I don't know them. I'm not born and bred in this city."

Another "newcomer" is Mrs. Hammond, whose husband presides over a very large international corporation. They have lived in the city for twenty years. They have not yet made the city's social register; but their daughter, Mrs. Carnes, has—on her father's merits, not her husband's. They are members of the city's most elite upper-class club. Mrs. Hammond thinks that some of the old families in the city have fallen behind the times and are not living up to their responsibilities as leaders: "I think there are a great many old city families who have just gone by the boards in terms of giving. Their fathers and grandfathers were the instigators of most of what's good here, but now you have newcomers like my husband and myself who are valuable to the city. We're not old city.