A Belonging Deferred

Class is one of the largest societal divisions in America and throughout the world, but class is much more than just money. Class is culture, it is ideas, and though one’s financial situation might change, one’s class identity may not. Many people who undergo social mobility from the working class face role strain – conflict between the roles they are expected to perform as a part of their social status – as they learn to struggle with their cultural upbringing and the new world into which they have been socialized. This leads to the “one foot in the door, one foot out” effect where one is torn between the two worlds in which they live. One might wonder how this is a bold claim, the idea of role strain is an accepted theory within the field of sociology. Not many would argue that upward mobility is tough. Rather, where the problem lies is with the American dream. The idea that as long as one works hard they will be able to climb the ladder and achieve success is an integral part of American culture. This has led many hardworking, motivated people out of the working class into education and better career options landing them in a higher socioeconomic status. By definition, this is achievement of the American dream. However, it is not necessarily a dream worth achieving.

Art Markman, PhD in Ulterior Motives and contributor to the website Psychology Today discusses the psychology of belonging. Markman claims that several studies have shown that
even the slightest bit of a perceived relationship amongst a group increases motivation and feelings of warmth and happiness (Markman). In short, people want to belong. This strong desire for belonging is an aspect of all people’s lives; whether it’s with family, friends, workers, or any other groups, people always strive to feel included and as if they are a part of something. Consequently, the pursuit of the American dream shatters this sense of belonging. This is because while one’s income may increase therefore boosting them up the socioeconomic ladder, changing culture is not as easy of a feat. Resocialization is a long process and in many cases it is not a complete one. In her piece “Stupid Rich Bastards” from the collection This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class, Laurel Black discusses her transition from the working class into the highbrow life of college academe. In one instance, Black’s sister calls her about a confrontation with her boyfriend. As Black begins to attempt to give her legal advice, her sister screams at her over the phone “Fuck you! Fuck you! Don’t talk to me like college, talk to me like a sista!” (23). Black felt torn between two worlds: the world of her family, and the world of her newly acquired social position. Many would cite Black as a success story, a motivated young woman who rose out of poverty into academics. However, Black does not view herself as successful. “My father’s dream of how I would live and move between two worlds, two ways of speaking and knowing, haunts me” (24). Black obviously feels torn between her two worlds. In society’s eyes, she is successful. In her eyes, she is lost.

The question is then raised is it really worth chasing the dream? Is it worth sacrificing the ties we have with other people for our own personal success especially with those of whom we love? If belonging is a psychosocial structure, social mobility is a dysfunction of that structure. Harris and Marsh discuss this to some length in their article “Is Raceless Identity An Effective Strategy For Academic Success Among Blacks?” One of the most important ways an individual
can feel belonging is through shared cultural identity. Cultural capital among minority groups includes shared language, heritage, religion, beliefs, stories, and a whole variety of other traits that make each group unique, and give its members a high sense of collectivism and belonging. However, when one tries to abandon this cultural background to try to succeed in an affluent, Anglo-normative society, complications arise. More specifically, the aforementioned “one foot in, one foot out” effect starts to take hold. As minority groups try to blend in with the white majority by looking, dressing, and talking white, they lose their sense of belonging derived by their shared cultural identity. When one assimilates into another group, they are a stranger in a strange land. Harris and Marsh discuss how some Blacks embrace their culture, but thereby compromise their success by differentiating themselves from the majority, and then there are those Blacks who compromise their cultural identity in order to better assimilate (Harris and Marsh). Whether one chooses assimilation or differentiation, the results are the same; that person never quite feels accepted anywhere. The assimilators are viewed as “acting white” (Harris and Marsh) by the black community, and the differentiators are viewed as “reinforcing black culture” and staying loyal to their cultural ties. Therefore, this creates a stress on ethnoracial and class minorities because in order for upward mobility, one must almost strive to completely change every ascribed status they have.

Of course, the number one method for upward social mobility is education, and minorities in education are prone to significant stress and difficulty. In his piece, “A Class Traitor In Academe”, Thomas Benton discusses his experience with upward mobility, both as someone who used education to achieve upward mobility and carry out the idyllic image of the American dream, and now on the other side of academics as a college professor. Benton claims he feels a “deeper empathy” with people from his economic background than he does with the
people who he is “supposed to be interchangeable with…on the basis of appearance” (Benton). Furthermore, he discusses his discontent with his work due to the fact that many of his students come from “social strata far above mine” (Benton). He also shows signs of guilt for getting out of the socioeconomic background of his upbringing, discussing about how many other people his age in his hometown have no education and can’t find jobs due to a dwindling labor market, causing an increase in 30 + year olds who are forced to live with their parents due to being unable to provide for themselves (Benton). Laurel Black discusses similar themes in her piece, “Stupid Rich Bastards”. Talking about the disconnect between the working class and academia, Black states she is “…seeking a way to keep the language of the working class in academia…” (25). If higher education is the first step in upward social mobility, it is obvious that from the very beginning of the process minorities begin to feel ostracized from their home culture, be that a culture of race, ethnicity or class.

One might wonder, then, where the disconnect is. Where does the process of transition from working class to upper class go awry? The answer can be found in the definition of class. In her article, “Complex Subjectivities: Class, Ethnicity, And Race In Women's Narratives Of Upward Mobility”, Sandra Jones discusses the example of one woman referred to as Casey that she interviewed. In this interview, Jones makes note of the use of the word and when referring to class and money (Jones). This is because the two are separate ideas. The different classes are determined by income rates, yes, so money does play a large role in class. However, whereas income rates can go up and down for a person, class is much harder to change. Class is learned by individuals during the early ages of their life, when socialization-based learning is at its prime. People learn the different norms, values, beliefs, traits, mannerisms, customs and conventions of their class identity from their family. Therefore, if one is born into the working
class, they learn the cultural and social capital of the working class. If one is born into the upper class, they learn a whole different set of cultural and social capital from the working class. This is complicated even more by the infusion of different minority experiences, as sadly enough those in the working class often enough belong to other minority groups as well. The complication then arises during the resocialization process. As previously mentioned, these minority members begin to feel ostracized during the first step of their upward mobility, which is education. As they complete this, however, and move into the “real” world, the world of the white elite, the world of the “stupid rich bastards” as Laurel Black refers to them, they must forget and learn at the same time. They must forget all of the class conventions they learned growing up, and learn to live a whole new life. Elizabeth Cole and Safiya Oman discuss this at length in their article “Race, Class And The Dilemmas Of Upward Mobility For African Americans” (Cole and Oman). Although this article is through the lens of specifically African Americans, it is true for all socioeconomic minority members. They ask the same question previously asked in this piece: is the American dream worth it? Or, more specifically, is “intergeneration class mobility” worth it? One thing they discuss is a loss of psychological well-being. In keeping with Dr. Art Markman’s analysis of the psychology of belonging, it is obvious that the loss of belonging caused by intergeneration class mobility, better known as the stereotypical American dream, is a cause for psychological distress. One example discussed in Cole and Oman’s piece is the example of a female, African American journalist from the working class, Leanita McClain, and her eventual suicide. Her suicide was caused, Cole and Oman claim, in part due to feelings of “alienation from other Blacks and condescension from Whites” (Cole and Oman). It’s all about perceived class betrayal. She was a poor Black girl
trying to join a rich White world, and so she never really fit in anywhere. She was too White and upper class for other poor Blacks, and too poor and Black for rich Whites.

During the writing of this piece, a problem became apparent: class and ethnoracial lines are often drawn parallel, and tend to blur together sometimes. What can be claimed as classism can also be claimed as racism or a number of other kinds of discrimination. What this creates, then is not so much a poor vs. rich or black vs. white conflict, but a minority vs. majority conflict. American students are socialized to believe the American dream of upward social mobility through hard work, perseverance and rugged individualism is one worth pursuing. However, more important perhaps than living up to idyllic American image of family life, is staying in one’s own place of belonging. Just because upward social mobility is the most commonly cited American dream, doesn’t mean it has to be everyone’s American dream. Rather, the American dream should be one of belonging in a place of “beloved community”, as author bell hooks words it (45). While it is very unlikely that the minority/majority division will dissipate in any significant way within the current lifetime, perhaps the definition of success and the American dream will. Therefore, as a call to action, and a quite controversial one as that, it can only be said that if one would be happier in the ghetto than in the suburbs, if one would be happier in the social solidarity of poverty than the lonesomeness of wealth, if one would rather be seen as lazy and happy than hardworking and miserable, then that truly is the American dream one should pursue with all their being.
Works Cited


