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Social Advancement from Poverty

Social advancement may seem like a simple thing. It could be seen as the process of simply growing up, getting an education, and becoming successful in the working world. When one is trying to gain social advancement out of poverty, however, it is much more complicated. There are many more roadblocks in place than one might imagine and many systems that are set against allowing this progress to happen. To advance in society, coming from poverty, it does not only require work, it also requires resilience. Even with this resilience, there are complicated factors that come into play, for example, the guilt one may feel for supposedly leaving behind the people from their original social status or the lack of respect from the group that they have now become a part of due to where they come from. For those who come from poverty, social advancement is a challenging and complex task.

For those born into poverty, social advancement is difficult from the very beginning. This is not because they aren't as smart or they don't want it as much. It is because of a specific parenting style seen in low-income families. This parenting style

leaves the children lacking the social skills necessary to create opportunities for advancement. Malcolm Gladwell's book "Outliers" has a great example of this difference between low income and middle-class children, and the way their parents shape their thinking about their given and prospective place in the world. Gladwell describes a sociological study done by Annette Lareau on a group of twelve third-grade families of different races from both poor and wealthy homes. Lareau discusses the difference in the styles of middle-class and low income parenting, explaining that a low income parent usually sees their child's education as being in the hands of the school and the teachers. The middle class parent encourages their child to hone any skills they have in after school activities and at home. Gladwell explains, "Lareau stresses that one style isn't morally better than the other. The poorer children were, to her mind, often better behaved, less whiny, more creative in making use of their own time, and had a well-developed sense of independence"(Gladwell 104). To this point, the difference in parenting is not a difference of good and bad, it is a difference in the social skills that are created. In the case of the more wealthy children, they are creating a skill from a young age that can help them succeed in life and lead to social advancement.

Children growing up in poverty can see the way the systems in place are working against their parents and assume that these systems will work against them too. In contrast, wealthier children see their parents working the systems in place to their advantage and grow up with a sense of belonging in certain situations. These different parenting styles also lead the middle-class children to a sense of entitlement, but not in the negative sense that we may initially think of when hearing that word. This kind of

entitlement is the feeling of control in situations with adults or those in power positions and using them to their own advantage to get ahead. In one specific example Gladwell explains a scenario from Lareau's study in which a child from one of the middle-class families, Alex Brindell, is going to the doctor. Alex's mother prepares him in the car by telling him to think of any questions to ask the doctor, as this is his opportunity to get his questions answered. Alex does this and during his doctor appointment feels comfortable enough to interrupt his doctor and ask questions about the statistics he is told about his health and eventually to ask the doctor his prepared question and be given a solution. This is not a skill that the working-class children seem to have. Gladwell says, "[They] were characterized by 'an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint.' They didn't know how to 'customize'... whatever environment they were in, for their best purposes"(Gladwell 105). Not learning this particular skill can make it more difficult to get ahead in life and eventually move up through social classes. This is not to say that it isn't a skill people learn later in life as well, but it is especially helpful to learn this from the beginning and use it to one's advantage.

To this same point, although social advancement is not as easy for children who grow up in poverty, this in no way means it is impossible. In her essay "Ghetto Fabulous", Tina Fakhrid-Deen describes her experience when moving back to the "ghetto" neighborhood in which she grew up. She says, "I soon realized that I had somehow crossed over and was officially middle class. It was confusing, because I wasn't like the bourgeois Blacks who knew nothing about hard times and mocked the accursed lot of poor folks. I was different"(Tea 158). She sees herself as "different" in

this situation because moving back into this neighborhood, she knows the life that many of her neighbors are living, she understands it because it was once her life as well. However she recognizes that her perspective is different now, as a middle-class woman starting a family in this kind of neighborhood. She worries about break-ins and describes the kinds of looks she receives from the other people in her neighborhood as “jealous eyes [ogling her]”. Fakhrid-Deen goes on to discuss the realization that because of her new social class, and moving back to the same neighborhood, she has a new role when living there. She explains that there could be no community here, “Not until I use my newfound middle-class power to advocate for my new neighbors, here in Bronzeville”(Tea 159). Essentially, I believe what she is saying here is that there is a certain level of guilt that comes with social advancement, the idea of moving back to her old neighborhood as part of a new social class made her feel like a “traitor” and this was something she has to reconcile and find a solution for within herself.

Another difficult aspect of social advancement, besides the social skills and entitlement children of different classes learn and the guilt one might feel in ascending social classes, is the lack of respect one might receive from the social class they advance to. In the essay “The Poet and the Pauper” by Meliza Beñales, a soon-to-be published writer, is confronted with a situation in which she realized just how misunderstood she is by the social class she has worked her way up to. She meets a famous, published poet in a laundromat and he essentially tells her that there is no place for her writing in this community and that it is not necessary. Beñales explains that this is not a new thing for her, people often make these comments about her writing but

what people might not understand is just how deeply these kinds of comments affect her as a person who has come so far to try and have their voice heard. She says, "I wanted to break down the racism, the classism, the outright rude nature of the poet's question, his comments like seared grease on a frying pan that just wouldn't come clean"(Tea 9). She illustrates her struggle to get to where she is and it is clear that when others question her worth and deservedness that this hits her hardest because these are things she has asked herself her whole life. When faced with the question of "why am I here, how did I get here, and do I belong here", Beñales says, "I don't focus on 'why me'. Rather I take it as it comes, and please know, Mr.-Famous-Poet-from-the-Laundromat, that I am worthy"(Tea 13). Beñales is able to come to this conclusion not through the acceptance, respect, or understanding of those in her new social community, it is because she knows that this is something she deserves based on her hard work and talent and getting herself to the place she is today using her experiences in the lower class.

As you can see, social advancement from poverty is no simple task. In execution it is complicated due to certain skills that low-income children lack and due to this lack that are not able to manipulate their environments to best serve themselves. Low-income children don't have the same sense of entitlement as middle-class children and ask themselves the questions that both Tina Fakhrid-Deen and Meliza Beñales have, most likely, both asked themselves: "Do I have the right to this better life? Do I deserve it and do I belong?" These questions continue to be fueled into adulthood due to the guilt one might feel by moving on from their old life and the people who

surrounded them. It also comes up in people who do not think others belong based on where they come from and the life experiences they have. In contrast, those who come from poverty and are resilient enough to move themselves and their families up from low to middle and upper class, are the most deserving out of anyone. They have had to face the most roadblocks, opposition, and work harder than anyone might expect to get to where they are and this in itself, makes them worthy of everything they have earned. The most important thing is that they use their newfound, hard earned, privilege and power to help those who are in the same situations from whence they came.

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