Stratification Paper

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Abstract

In this assignment, my classmates and I are given the opportunity to gain a better understanding of stratification through a simulated experience of what real people go through every day. We each were assigned a class level and asked to work through a budget for a member of that class for a family with two young children. My family includes Nathan and Mia and their two boys: Kai and Leo. Nathan is an accountant with a salary of $79,333 and Mia is a marketing manager and earns a salary of $69,079. Each day, Mia is able to pack the kids lunches, put them on the bus before school and be there when they get home. Luckily, she is able to do some work at home and spend time with the kids, though she usually goes into the office while they are in school. On days when her work keeps her from home, Nathan's parents live close by and can watch them after school until either parent returns home. They just purchased a new home closer to Nathan's parents in Harrisonburg for about $339,5004. They also decided to buy two used cars to help in their commute to work and taking their kids to playdates and practices. They are able to spend about $350 a week on groceries and have a considerable amount of savings put away for college and retirement.

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I worked with Kayla and Jonathan to compare the results for our projects, through which I made many interesting discoveries. The first notable detail was the difference between their decisions and mine, but especially each other’s. For one thing, Kayla's net monthly income was over $12,000 more than Jonathan's annual income. And my initial savings were about $10,000 more than Jonathan's annual income. So, in my discussion with Kayla she explained having too much money and not knowing where to put all of it and Jonathan had to make sacrifices with his money just to have enough to pay for food and housing. Kayla and I both had families of four, whereas Jonathan's was only three. Kayla had the money to buy a very nice big house, two brand new cars, a summer vacation house, and she decided to own a pet dog. She was able to put aside $130,000 aside for college savings for her two children and both parents worked well paying highly respected jobs and still make some money in stock trade. Kayla has childcare at her job in the hospital and can hire people to help if she needed. Jonathan had to rent a more expensive place in order to be closer to his parents so they can help out with his kids. He had to buy a beat-up used car to use as transportation and buys all store brand groceries. He also has an entry level maintenance job and can barely put away money for his kids’ college, less than 10% of his savings because he had to put money toward more pressing issues. Another interesting thing was how much we each put aside for emergencies, Kayla was able to put aside $2,107, I had $470, and Jonathan had only $50. So, if something were to happen to Jonathan or one of his kids, he would not only have a hard time paying for the emergency and whatever other expenses it may entail but also continuing to work to make more money to help pay for it. Whereas, Kayla or I have another parent in our household to help but also, we have more money in our savings to put toward the expenses.

The amount of income given to my family was adequate to live a very comfortable life. One of the biggest problems that I encountered was not spending enough money to align with the normal activities of someone within my assigned class. I do not have much experience with budgeting, especially for an entire family and with such big-ticket items like houses, cars, and savings. I found myself too often choosing to buy the less expensive house or buying less groceries and then having to go back and adjust to make the spending more realistic for someone in my situation. In my family growing up, I have always been taught to save as much money as possible, so it was difficult to do the opposite in this project. The switch from a saver to a spender was the most difficult part, which is revealing about real life stratification. In the sense that my classmates who were assigned to lower class levels had to worry a lot more about saving and making ends meet as well as they could. This became most evident in my conversations with Kayla, she had so much money to spend and at some points no idea where to put it all, but Jonathan had to stretch every dollar to make the most for their family. I had the luxury of having enough money to live comfortably and know where to put it, but not have to go through forms to get assistance or worrying if I could take care of all my responsibilities. I cannot imagine the level of stress my classmates in the lower levels must have been under, and even further, the real-life people who go through these situations.

One way that social class is defined in the United States is education (Giddens, Duneier, Appelbaum, Carr, 2011). So, when families have more to put away for their children for college, this gives them more life chances and likelihood to stay at the top of the social class system. When the parent can put aside large sums of money for college savings, like Kayla did, it makes them more likely to choose prestigious or expensive schools like ivy leagues or big D1 schools. You don't see many kids of upper-class families looking at small private schools like Bridgewater. In this project I came to realize that though choosing Bridgewater seemed like a personal choice of free will to me in the moment, there is much more in the bigger picture. Because of the money that my parents put away for me to go to college, my choices became more limited. Not to say it would have been impossible for me to go to one of those more expensive schools, just a lot harder. In the case of someone like Jonathan's kids who have barely any money put aside for college, out of necessity to buy more demanding things that the family needs to survive, their choices are even more limited and they might not even have the choice to go to school if they have to work after high school to help support their family. Of course, this is not what Jonathan or people who face this situation in real life want for their kids, but within their circumstances they cannot afford to do much else. They would want their kids to have a better chance to move up in social class when they grow older, but the chance for intergenerational mobility is small because it is dependent partially on the spending power they can put toward giving their kids higher education. GDAC explains another way in which social mobility is difficult for lower income families, that a few sociologists (such as Blau, Duncan, Sewell, and Hauser) discussed the rarity of people moving from the working class to the upper middle class in that educational attainment is what holds them back. Sewell and Hauser argued that connection between family background and equational attainment occurs because parents, teachers, and friends influence the educational and career aspirations of the child. The aspirations are reproduced from parents to kids because they share social location and ties (GDAC, 2011). In terms of social exclusion, I think any that might occur is related to the four laws of social exchanges, most specifically the law of inequality. This law explains that the law of liking only works well when people are of approximately equal status, in other words it is difficult to be friends with someone who has more power than you do. So, I would be socially excluded by upper class people because they have more prestige and cultural capital than someone in my class would. But I would also probably have some sense of false consciousness and try to live more lavishly like those above me. In turn, I would probably socially exclude people of a lower class than I do because I have more power. It is also interesting to note that my kids have a chance for upward mobility based on the life chances that I was able to give them, and they also have some chance to move downward in some situations. And Jonathan’s kids have a lower likelihood of upward mobility. But Kayla’s kids have very little chance for downward mobility, they will most likely stay upper class because of all the opportunities they are given. This was interesting for me to learn while doing this project because I hadn’t thought of it much before. I feel as though it relates to an issue with what many people consider the “American Dream”. The American Dream ideal was created during the industrial revolution to motivate lower class workers to work their hardest, by giving them the hope that anyone can work their way up to the top. People would point to cases of someone who started from the bottom and through their hard work became successful and wealthy, even though these cases are rare. Now a days, people still act like anyone can work their way up from the bottom, but they ignore these sociological concepts of social mobility and don’t realize how many obstacles may stand in their way, obstacles that hard work cannot always solve. But it only pushes stratification within our country even further and the gap between classes continue to grow. Why even the playing field when “anyone can work their way to the top?”. This attitude keeps the people on top on top and puts more and more people at the bottom. As outlined in the text and the *Class Matters* articles upward and downward mobility is based on income, occupation (prestige), education, and wealth. And even though class is made up by society, its effects are very real, the “Shadowy Lines That Still Divide” described in the article are becoming more and more prevalent and important in our society. The articles explain how people in today’s understand class less and show how different things are. Especially in the interactive portion where you can fill in your personal information and be rated on which class you would fit, the differences between class are emphasized.

References

Giddens, A., Duneier, M., Appelbaum, R., & Carr, D. 2011. *Essentials of Sociology, 3 rd Edition .* New York: Norton.

Leonhart, J. S. (2005, May 15). Shadowy Lines That Still Divide. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/15/us/class/shadowy-lines-that-still-divide.html>

Appendices

Include your appendices here.

1. Family Budget Worksheet

2. Housing Information

3. Transportation Information

4. Food Purchased (one week’s worth) List