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SUNDAYREVIEW

Crossing Class Lines

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Gray Matter

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IN a society as unequal as ours, people tend to interact almost exclusively with people who share similar educational histories, incomes and occupations — and when they do interact with others from different social classes, even as friends, those relationships seem fraught with misunderstanding and tension. That’s partly a matter of circumstance, but it’s also a matter of habit. As the comedian Kevin Hart jokes, “I stay in my lane, people. I stay in my financial lane.”

In such a bifurcated society, what happens when people from one social class cross lanes? Can we speak to, engage with and understand those whose lives are more or less fortunate than our own? And, if not, are there ways to increase engagement with cross-class partners?

To examine these questions, we conducted a series of studies on how economic inequality influences interactions between people, in collaboration with the psychologists Ursula Beermann, Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner at the University of California, Berkeley.

In our first study, we asked pairs of female college friends to answer questions about the quality of interactions within their friendship. We assessed their social class backgrounds by aggregating information about the educational attainment and income of their parents. We found that friends from different class backgrounds spent less time together, talked less often and got into more arguments, compared to friends from the same class background.

In a follow-up study, we observed pairs of college students discussing the meaning of life. We coded the subtle facial muscle movements in the expressions of the listener during these discussions as a way to gauge genuine emotional engagement. We assessed social class by asking participants to place themselves on a 10-rung ladder, with the highest rung representing the people with the most money, most education and most respected jobs. Our analyses revealed that participants laughed less, and displayed nongenuine smiles more, when listening to someone from a different class.

Together, these studies reveal that cross-class interactions are plagued with difficulties: Class differences are associated with a lower capacity of friends to engage with each other during daily interactions and less emotional connection between new acquaintances.

Why do people engage more with people from their own social class than with those from different classes? To find out, we randomly assigned research participants to interact online with someone from either an upper-class background (described as being born in Palo Alto, Calif., and having parents who are a lawyer and a professor) or a lower-class background (described as being born in Oakland, Calif., no longer being in touch with his or her father, and having a mother who works in a factory). We assessed participants' social class by aggregating information about their income, educational attainment and occupational prestige.

Participants were less interested in spending time and becoming friends with the person when the profile described a cross-class partner, compared to a same-class partner. This was especially true of upper-class participants, who were much less interested in engaging with a lower-class person than with an upper-class counterpart. When we analyzed why participants were more or less interested, we found that they reported that their values and interests differed too much from those of cross-class partners for the interactions to be successful.

Such findings raise significant concerns: All else aside, the lack of cross-class interaction will make it that much harder for people in lower social classes to develop the relationships and other forms of social capital necessary for economic opportunity and educational advancement.

That concern led us to examine whether there might be ways to increase engagement when people cross class boundaries. We reasoned that if people engaged less with cross-class partners because of perceived differences, then an intervention that led people to realize ways in which they were similar to cross-class partners might, in turn, boost engagement.

In this part of our research, we asked participants to think of the things that characterized them, and what characterized a person from a different social class. Participants listed the three most important shared characteristics with a cross-class partner, and wrote a two- to five-paragraph essay describing how they and the partner might be similar on the most important shared characteristic.

By and large, the intervention worked: After the exercise, participants from different backgrounds showed levels of engagement with cross-class partners that were comparable to natural levels of engagement with same-class partners.

Though distance exists between the haves and have-nots, our research identifies one way to bridge that gap. Through this one simple exercise, friends, co-workers and strangers can find ways to smooth over the challenges of crossing class boundaries, with significant benefits for people on both sides of the divide — but particularly for those who are trying to climb the economic ladder.

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