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Elite and Upper-Class Families

In her memoir *Personal History*, Katharine Meyer Graham (1997) traces her family's rise into the upper class to her grandfather, a member of a distinguished family with French Jewish roots dating back many generations. He immigrated to the United States in 1859, as the nation was rapidly industrializing and modernizing. Although his family origins were more than humble, his life story exemplified the **American Dream**: He worked as a store clerk while learning English, eventually became the owner of that store, and went on to become a wealthy banker. As a result, Katharine's father, Eugene Isaac Meyer, grew up in a privileged family: He graduated from Yale University at the age of 20 and, restless with his progress at a major law firm, began to invest money in real estate and the stock market at a crucial period of economic expansion, eventually buying a seat on the stock exchange. Meyer had already made millions of dollars by the time he met his wife-to-be, Agnes Ernst, a recent graduate of Barnard. Katharine describes her mother as a strikingly beautiful, intelligent young woman who was immersed in the world of art and supporting herself as a freelance writer. Her marriage to Meyer **typified that of upper-class couples: She brought to the union beauty, education, and sophistication, while he was a business tycoon who had made a fortune of \$40–\$60 million by 1915 and was to go on to purchase the *Washington Post*. Meyer's fortune enabled Ernst to continue to pursue her artistic and intellectual interests while making a home for her husband and children.**

For Katharine, growing up in a wealthy family meant having nannies and 10–12 domestic servants at her disposal—for example, she writes of having two bells in her room that she could ring for assistance. As a child, she took private dance, music, and French lessons and traveled extensively; in addition, she was taught class-related behaviors, such as a strong respect for tradition and support for cultural organizations. But part of her **class socialization** was learning that talking about money and wealth in her house was taboo—in fact, thrift was emphasized—and any thought of living a life of **idleness or leisure was eschewed**. Her parents emphasized to the children that “you couldn’t just be a rich kid, that you had to do something, to be engaged in useful, productive work; you shouldn’t and couldn’t do *nothing*” (K. Graham 1997:52). Indeed, instilling in their children a sense of ***noblesse oblige***, the notion that people born of high rank have the responsibility to be kind to or help others, is common among parents in the upper class.

For many upper-class families, this is expressed through charitable giving: In a recent book, Frank (2007:162) notes that **philanthropy** remains popular and sometimes even a source of competition among members of the upper class. Families with incomes of a million dollars or more donated more than \$30 billion to charities in 2003, up from \$9 billion in 1995. Such **giving adds to the status of the elite and their reputation for generosity in helping others**.

Defining the Upper Class

Katharine Graham’s experience typifies much of what comes to mind when we think about being wealthy—servants, multiple homes, extensive travel, an elite education, and a lifestyle based on tradition, manners, and social graces. In 1958, E. Digby Baltzell, a sociologist and member of the upper class, offered the following definition of the “upper class concept”:

a group of families, whose members are **descendants of successful individuals** (elite members) of one, two, three or more generations ago. These families are at the top of the *social class* hierarchy; they are brought up together, are friends, and are intermarried one with another; and finally, they maintain a distinctive style of life and a kind of primary group solidarity which sets them apart from the rest of the population. (Baltzell 1958:7)

Referring to its members as being **“successful”** and “at the top of the social class hierarchy” **evades the issue of exactly how much wealth** is owned by the upper class, a topic of much interest and debate among social scientists today. Elaine Leeder (2004:168) points out, for example, that at

the very top of the wealth hierarchy are the 420,000 American households that constitute the superrich; they have an average of \$8.9 million in wealth. Wealth inequality has always exceeded income inequality, but between 1983 and 1989, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the wealthy spiraled in the United States (Leeder 2004; Perrucci and Wysong 2008; Kerbo 2009). For example, 1 percent of Americans own about 40 percent of all privately held corporate stock (Kerbo 2009:163), while the richest 10 percent of the population owns nearly 80 percent of all real estate and 60 percent of all money in bank accounts (Leeder 2004:167). This concentration of wealth has important implications, such as its impact on democracy and political power. Many scholars point out that people with significant wealth control major aspects of the economy and have the power to influence political ideologies and patterns of voting; they also occupy the highest ranks in the political system and have a major impact on political decision making. For example, the majority of people who are corporate directors of banks and industries are from the upper class, as are most of those in Cabinet positions with the government (Dye 1995; Domhoff 2006). Thus, following Max Weber's lead, many include power and control over the economy in their definition of the upper class (see, e.g., Rossides 1997).

Another notable aspect of Baltzell's definition that has been commented upon by other scholars is the cohesiveness of the upper class; that is, those in the upper class tend to be friends who intermarry and experience a kind of group solidarity. He argued that the upper class resembled a caste system, with family life revolving around a complete set of activities and associations. According to Baltzell:

Even the most socially secure families . . . place a high value on belonging to the correct clubs and associations and making an appearance at the fashionable balls, dancing assemblies, weddings and funerals; and where their children are concerned, the right summer resorts, dancing classes, schools and colleges, and finally, their daughter's debut, are each and severally of vital importance. (cited in Marger 2008:85)

This suggests that the upper class constitutes a closed society of people who rarely venture beyond their own class in forming friendships and associations. That exclusivity extends to living in select cities and neighborhoods where they are isolated (and protected) from their social class inferiors. Perrucci and Wysong (2008:66–67) contend that while the upper class has always distanced itself from the public and public institutions by establishing exclusive schools, neighborhoods, and clubs, this has now nearly taken the form of class secession. For example, there has been a notable increase in the

number of gated communities and elite housing areas that are literally walled off from the surrounding areas. Frank (2007) argues that the newly rich have virtually formed their own country, “Richistan,” that has a culture that differs from the old established elite. In another work devoted to understanding the new upper class, David Brooks (2000) describes the emergence of what he calls “**Latte Towns**”—**liberal communities situated in magnificent settings that feature “upscale retailers, gourmet bread stores, handmade furniture outlets, [and] organic grocery stores.”** Thus, this physical class secession is mirrored by the participation of upper-class families in specific activities, elite clubs, and a distinct culture.

Notable in **early definitions of the upper class**, such as those proffered by Baltzell (1958), is that they **include those who are the descendants of economic elites or successful people**. This captures the traditional distinction made by sociologists between the upper upper class and lower upper class, or basically those with **“old” money and those with “new” money**. The highest status is accorded to those with old money, especially the upper upper class that has had wealth for generations, often dating back to the eighteenth century. For them, **wealth is inherited and associated with good breeding, social graces, and Ivy League educations**—and a strong prohibition against the “ostentatious display and conspicuous consumption” that was once common during the Gilded Age (Mayer and Buckley 1970). Those in the lower upper class have “new money,” and while they may be wealthier than those in the upper upper class, most have earned their money in their own lifetime. They typically do not have the well-known family names of the older upper class (e.g., DuPont, Rockefeller) and may lack their cultural habitus and social graces. Thus, despite their wealth, they are set apart from those in the older upper class; for example, as one upper-class woman explained when describing members of the old upper class: “[The old families] will always look at me as an outsider. They’ve already gone with the same people, and they talk about people I don’t know. Their lives are ingrown” (Ostrander 1984:24).

How one earns money and the lifestyle one cultivates are important factors in membership in the upper class. For new money to become a part of the upper class is a process; for example, although John D. Rockefeller earned a fortune in oil in the late 1800s, he was seen as a “gangster” and a social inferior in many upper-class circles (Kerbo 2009). Even today, there are notable status differences and fissures between old and new wealth, although over time they became quite similar in lifestyle. Most live in large homes staffed by domestic servants and own multiple homes. Upper-class children attend “finishing” and “prep” schools and prestigious colleges, where they are expected to cultivate their artistic and intellectual interests.

Birthright is essential, as “ancestry, heritage, and breeding” are major elements in their sense of being upper class (Ostrander 1984). They disproportionately influence the economy and political system and engage in leisure activities that are not easily imitated by those in the lower classes, such as polo and yachting. They spend a great deal of money on travel and philanthropy, and overall they emphasize conservative social attitudes; cultivated tastes in art, music, and literature; and unobtrusive manners (Mayer and Buckley 1970; Kendall 2002).

Finally, being in the upper class has been almost synonymous with being male and white. Marital endogamy has meant that women in the upper class marry men of their own background, so their lives and identities are subsumed under that of their husbands. In recent decades, however, many women have ascended the corporate hierarchy and garnered power and wealth. One study found that the number of corporate directorships held by women grew from 9.5 percent in 1995 to 13.6 percent in 2003, and nearly 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies have at least one woman director (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2007). Little research, however, has been done on how this affects marriage and family life.

Whether there was historically—or is currently—an African American upper class is a matter of some debate (Bowser 2007), although there were clearly those who were at the top of the black social class hierarchy and considered themselves members of an elite class. Being considered a member of the black elite was initially strongly related to having light skin and white ancestry; in the late nineteenth century, most were entrepreneurs (e.g., barbers, tailors, grocers), and a few were doctors and lawyers (Meier and Lewis 1959). Black elites worked hard to embrace the same values as their white counterparts. In a study of Boston’s black upper class, Cromwell (1994) found that prior to the 1960s, most of them eschewed discussions of race as a problem, emphasized racial progress, refused to associate with anything African, and because interracial marriages were legal in Boston, often married outside their race.

In this chapter, I trace the origins of the upper class in the United States and discuss how their social class position influences family patterns, such as marriage, gender relations, and the socialization of children. My definition of the upper class includes that top 20 percent of the population that can be considered the privileged class, a concept used by Perrucci and Wysong (2008:29–30) to describe that small segment of the population known as the *superclass* (who own immense wealth and control the economy and political system), together with the highly paid managers and professionals who are employed by the government, corporations, and universities. Members of the elite class discussed in this chapter include the

“old money” upper class as well as highly educated professionals and successful entrepreneurs, whose increased numbers have caused recent growth in the privileged class. Brooks (2003) calls the **new upper class culture the “Bobo Establishment”** because its members combine bourgeois and bohemian cultures. The new upper class had its origins in the 1960s, a revolutionary era when **intelligence began to compete with heredity** as the criteria for entering elite universities. Concerned that they were creating an intellectual aristocracy based on heredity, many universities eliminated Jewish quotas and restrictions on female students, and the number of college-educated Americans skyrocketed between 1955 and 1974. The number of institutions of higher education also increased, along with the number of and need for upper-level professionals. By the mid-1990s, college graduates were earning 70 percent more than high school graduates, and those with graduate degrees were earning 90 percent more (p. 166). Similarly, in *Richistan*, Frank (2007:1–2) notes that the number of millionaire households in the United States more than doubled between 1995 and 2003, to 8 million. Yet, scholarship on family patterns among the upper class has remained relatively scarce as they are often less accessible to researchers. Thus, I draw on a few scholarly works and biographies to explore their lives.

Economic Elites: Historic Origins

The land and resources available for acquisition and economic development in North America starting in the 1600s truly made the continent a land of opportunity for early European settlers. The **origins of the upper class in America can be traced to the wealth accumulated by Southern plantation owners and eastern economic elites from the 1700s through the mid-1800s, and then from the emergence of industrial magnates during the late 1800s and early 1900s.** In the earlier historical period, agriculture production and the use of slave labor accounted for much of the wealth accumulated by those living in the South, and that wealth typically amounted to several hundred thousand dollars. For example, when George Washington died in 1799, his estate was valued at \$530,000 and he was seen as one of the richest Americans in his time. An economic elite also emerged on the east coast based on banking, commerce, and factory labor, and their lifestyles of power and privilege were in stark contrast to those of the masses of struggling workers. Howard Zinn ([1980] 2003) describes New York as resembling a feudal kingdom as early as 1689, when despite widespread suffering and starvation, the governor of the colony bestowed three-fourths of the land to 30 people. Such **inequality in wealth** also emerged early in Boston where, by

1770, 44 percent of the wealth was owned by the top 1 percent of property owners (pp. 47–48).

By the early 1800s, this hierarchy of wealth had become institutionalized. In the 1840s, for example, there were 39 millionaires in New York and Massachusetts (Mills 1956), and Boston had emerged as the financial center of the world. Oliver Wendell Holmes called members of this upper class “Boston Brahmins” and described them culturally as being noted for their “monopoly on Beacon Hill, their ancestral portraits and Chinese porcelains, humanitarianism, Unitarian faith in the march of the mind, Yankee shrewdness, and New England exclusiveness” (in T. H. O’Connor, 2006:17). Still, upper-class Bostonians eschewed the notion that their identity was based on their wealth and sought to make their city a model of moral and intellectual superiority. As Levine (1980) explains, they were considered the elites of the nation and defined their social status by social graces, philanthropy, education, and religion and only secondly by their business endeavors.

The Industrial Elite

Both the agricultural elite and the eastern elite were challenged by the emergence of an industrial elite and the staggering amount of wealth it amassed. In *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills (1956) described the process by which late nineteenth-century business tycoons, often strongly criticized “robber barons,” were transformed into economic heroes of the corporate world. During the Gilded Age that followed the Civil War, the opportunities for making a fortune in industry were unparalleled, according to Mills, as the new industrialists had seemingly unlimited natural resources, no military neighbors to oppose them, an ideology of power and progress, and a willing work force. The wealth to be earned from technologies such as the railroad, oil, and steel was further enhanced by the creation of a banking system, the rise of corporations, and a government that favored trusts and was highly influenced by free market principles (Frank 2007:38). In his critical appraisal of the Gilded Age, Mills (1956) writes that the “American elite entered modern history as a virtually unopposed bourgeoisie. No national bourgeoisie, before or since, had such opportunities and advantages” (p. 12). He also notes that economic elites gained their wealth by exploiting resources and workers, killing competitors, and drawing private capital from public sources—all the while using state legislators and lawyers to do their bidding. The emerging industrial economy offered unprecedented opportunities for some to accrue fortunes that far exceeded what was available in the agricultural society. The biggest fortunes in the mid-1800s, according to Frank (2007:38), were between \$10 and \$20 million, but by the turn of the

twentieth century, that had risen to \$200 to \$300 million. By the early 1900s, John D. Rockefeller, who founded Standard Oil, owned more than a billion dollars in wealth and represented a new historical force in American society (Hall 1992).

Sociologist Max Weber saw Protestantism as a major ideological force in the accumulation of wealth in the United States, arguing that as a religious ideology, it fostered the virtues of hard work and thrift and saw worldly success as evidence of being among God's chosen. Indeed, many industrialists who made fortunes mediated the tension between democratic ideals and unparalleled economic inequality by initiating traditions of personal thrift and charitable giving to educational, health, and welfare organizations. They embraced what was known as the gospel of wealth, which contended that a chosen few had been selected by God to administer the nation's resources in rational ways that would advance the good for all of society (Hall 1992). For example, Andrew Carnegie (1900), a railroad tycoon, wrote that it was the duty of wealthy men to "set an example of modest, unostentatious living" and to "consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds, which he is called upon to administer . . . to produce the most beneficial results for the community" (p. 15).

While there were commonalities in their political and economic ideologies, the eastern merchants often disparaged the new industrialists ascending into their class as vulgar, poorly educated, and morally unfit (Beckert 2001). They also feared the rise of industrialization and the loss of their power and wealth to immigrants and other *nouveaux riches*. Many fought to keep immigrants out of the country and to ban those in the country from full participation in mainstream American life. According to Levine (1980), the motivation for developing elite boarding schools was often to preserve the upper-class culture and shield their children from both immigrants and the newly rich. Such boarding schools were one element in an array of strategies meant to separate the old established elite from those who had recently acquired riches but lacked the social graces and manners associated with being upper class. Other efforts by the old upper class to isolate themselves from their social inferiors included the creation of numerous exclusive social clubs during the 1800s and, by 1887, the *Social Register*, which listed the names of acceptable elite and upper-class families. Families wishing to be listed in the *Social Register* had to submit five letters of reference from families who were already in the *Social Register* and, once listed, could be dropped for being involved in scandalous behavior, such as divorcing (Kerbo 2009:158).

Despite efforts by the established upper class to isolate themselves from their newer counterparts, the two tiers have merged over time to

form a national upper class. The boarding schools initially established to exclude the *nouveaux riches* gradually came to admit them—often in order to survive economically (Levine 1980). At the height of its popularity in 1925, the *Social Register* was published in 25 cities. In 1976, it was taken over by Malcolm Forbes and consolidated and now includes the names of both segments of the upper class (Kerbo 2009:158–159). But while members of the upper class now attend the same schools and participate in the same activities, events, and clubs, elements of the fissure between old and new money remain. As the authors of *Class Matters* point out, while the old upper class still eschews the ostentatious display of wealth, many members of the new “hyper-rich” seem to embrace the ethic “If you’ve got it, flaunt it” (Correspondents 2005). Thus, members of the established elite are not beyond trading “barbarian stories” that focus on the outrageous expenditures and lack of manners of their newer members.

Family Life in the Upper Class

Research on upper-class families is relatively sparse, one result of the fact that members of the upper class are secluded from most other Americans because they have few reasons or opportunities to interact with people from other classes. Historically, one of the key characteristics of affluent families has been their role in choosing the marital partners of their children, largely as a strategy for maintaining and perpetuating wealth. It was not unheard of for marriages to be arranged by parents, but in most cases, parental influence was limited to making sure their children associated only with those from the “right” families. The self-segregation of the affluent from others, as seen in their choice of neighborhoods, schools, and leisure activities, often ensures that their children will marry and develop friendships within their social class. In the 1950s, children from upper-class families attended schools like Groton, Andover, Exeter, and St. Paul’s and engaged in elite sports such as fox hunting and polo (Brooks 2000). Cookson and Persell (1985:73) have described the school curriculum at elite boarding schools as classical and conservative. It originally focused on Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and logic and only later included “soft subjects” such as English, math, and history. Children also participated in social debuts as a way of meeting and marrying the right kind of people. As one upper-class mother explained, “The parties are safe. People you don’t know can’t crash. It’s a carefully checked list. You try to match names so you don’t get people just off the streets” (Ostrander 1984:87).

In 1975, Blumberg and Paul, replicating a study that was done 25 years earlier, examined marriage announcements from the *New York Times*—considered to be the most prestigious society pages—to study upper-class marriage trends. They found that the names of a significant majority of couples were listed in the *Social Register* and that large, formal marriages at Episcopal churches were still the norm. Their study revealed how important private schools were as marriage markets: Most of the grooms attended a private school in secondary, if not elementary, school, and enrollment in such schools meant their names were automatically placed on the invitation list to debutante parties, dances, and cotillions. A college education was nearly universal for couples who were marrying, although fewer had attended Ivy League schools than in the past. More recently, Brooks (2000) has argued that the *New York Times* wedding pages have shifted to more of a focus on “genius and geniality” than “noble birth and breeding.”

Brides and grooms from the upper class marry at slightly older ages than those in lower social classes, and, although college degrees and career paths are important, there are notable gender differences in education and career aspirations. Grooms were much more likely than brides to have done graduate work (49 percent versus 12 percent), and most men intended to enter traditionally male career paths, such as business or law (Blumberg and Paul 1975). The number of women attending college had increased remarkably since the 1950s, and these *New York Times* announcements emphasized the brides’ education and club affiliations. However, no reference was made to future career intentions of brides, which suggested marriage would exempt them from the labor market. Indeed, this gender division of marital labor is evident in research on upper-class couples.

Marital and Gender Relations

The men in upper-class families are often the sole wage earners and perpetuate the status of the family by expanding their wealth, maintaining memberships in exclusive all-male clubs, and mingling with politicians and other economic elites. The upper-class women in Ostrander’s (1984) study devoted themselves to being full-time wives and mothers but were also quite involved in philanthropic work. In their relationships with their husbands, many performed what sociologist Jessie Bernard called the “stroking” function of the traditional housewife; that is, they saw their roles as “showing solidarity, giving help, rewarding, agreeing, understanding and passively accepting” (p. 39). As one woman explained:

He's the brain in the family and it's my role to see that he's at his best. I've subjugated everything to that. When he comes home in the evening, this house must be perfectly quiet. I've told everyone the phone must not ring after five o'clock. He wants me to be pleasant, pretty and relaxed. I can't dare cry in front of him or show any emotion. I never bring a problem to him, except during forty-five minutes set aside on Sunday mornings for that purpose. I keep a list. (Ostrander 1984:39)

Ostrander (1984) found that **most wives seemed to accept their subordinate family roles and their husband's exemption from domestic affairs**. One wife said, "My husband never asks me what I think. He just tells me how it's going to be" (p. 37). Traditional gender ideologies, such as the split between the public and private arena and the notion of the **home as a haven and refuge for men**, were common:

My husband has never helped around the house or done anything for the children. . . . He expects me to make a nice home to come to, to be a cheery companion, to be ready to go on vacations when he wants to. He expects me to go along with what he wants to do. (P. 39)

It bears pointing out, however, that not all wives are willing to abide by traditional gender and class norms. Ostrander (1984) noted that **younger wives and wives who had brought money into the marriage often insisted on more equality in their marriages**. Indeed, it is likely that at least some educated, talented women have always challenged this trend, as Katharine Graham (1997) discovered when she read her mother's journal. This journal revealed that Agnes Ernst was determined to marry into wealth, despite having some hesitation about ultimately marrying a man of Jewish ancestry. She saw her **marriage, to a large extent, as a business contract that included having children, running the houses, and fulfilling her duty as hostess in exchange for financial support and status**. But as one journal entry revealed, she was determined to **maintain her own identity and intellectual life**:

I . . . rebelled inwardly and outwardly against the suddenly imposed responsibilities of marriage. During the first few years . . . I behaved as if the whole world were in a conspiracy to flatten out my personality and cast me into a universal mold called "woman." So many of my married college friends had renounced their intellectual interests and lost themselves in a routine of diapers, dinners, and smug contentment with life that I was determined this should not happen to me. I wanted a big family, but I also wanted to continue my life as an individual. (P. 19)

Another characteristic common among **wives** in upper-class families is **extensive involvement in community organizations and charity work**. Ostrander (1984) attributed this to their very strong class consciousness; they typically understand their class interests and the policies that support them, and they see volunteer work as a way to stave off the growth of the public sector. Their class consciousness was also evident in their clear idea of what it meant to be an upper-class family: They defined it in terms of **prominence in their community, being highly respected, having a certain reputation, being well established, and being married to men who headed major business enterprises**. Most were aware of their privileged positions, as indicated by one woman who said,

I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I have all the worldly goods that anyone could want. I've never wanted for anything, and I've never envied anybody. (P. 27)

Women in upper-class families play a vital role in **displaying and transmitting the proper lifestyle, culture, and social graces through their homes, the servants they hire, and their own style of dressing**. They also do the work of keeping up **kinship networks**, especially among the extended families, which are prevalent among the wealthy and seen as a way of perpetuating their status and class position. In a study of **elite Mexican families**, Lomnitz and Pérez Lizaur (1987) found that **family relations centered on a network of business owners and their wives and children**. Women were described as **centralizing figures**—especially in fostering and strengthening kinship networks in what they called the “grandfamily.” Researchers point out that despite their typically subordinate position in their marriages and exemption from the labor force, upper-class women are neither idle nor mere status appendages of their husbands; rather, they are frequently immersed in the world of reform and social activism, participants in cultural events, and members of charitable institutions (Farrell 1993). Their domesticity is in the context of extended family relations and intense sociality that includes business elites and fosters important economic alliances. As feminists have argued is the case for women in general, their lives defy the notion of a tidy division of labor that places men in the public and women in the private sphere of life.

Socializing Children

Social class background is the best predictor of childhood outcomes; it determines how well-adjusted children are, whether they succeed in school and

later in the labor market, when and whom they marry, and their ability to create stable families. These outcomes are specifically related to the amount of capital families are able to invest in their children. James Coleman (1988) suggests that there are three types of family capital that affect children: financial capital (income and wealth), human capital (parents' education and its impact on the cognitive environment of children), and social capital (the relationship between children, their parents, and other important family members). These forms of family capital are all related to helping children accumulate "cultural capital," described as an education that focuses on the "best of the west" when it comes to an appreciation of literature, music, social graces, and manners (Cookson and Persell 1985). In all regards, children of the upper class usually fare best.

One of the first things upper-class parents often do to ensure their children's future success is to get them placed in an elite educational setting. Gay, an upper-class mother who was interviewed by Diana Kendall (2002), said she made two telephone calls the moment she learned from her obstetrician that she was pregnant: She called her husband to share the news and an elite private school to place her unborn child's name on their waiting list. Although attending school was several years in the future, Gay explained that she wanted the child to

learn values that are in keeping with what we try to teach the children at home, and . . . develop playgroups and friendships with other children like themselves, playgroups that help them to know, from an early age, that they will be recognized for their hard work and their personal achievements. (P. 81)

Assembling the right "building blocks" for children was one of the essential childrearing tasks discussed by upper-class mothers, who sometimes referred to their mothering work as creating a "social bubble" made up of the proper environment, educational setting, and friendships for their child's optimal development. As one upper-class mother said,

We expose the boys to as broad a range of activities as possible, and from that they choose what they're interested in individually. They really have to be very interested in something before we'll support it, but then we'll go all the way with them. (Ostrander 1984:78–79)

Lawrence Otis Graham (1999), who grew up in an elite African American family in the 1960s, interviewed hundreds of upper-class blacks who created their own culture of power and privilege in a nation still segregated by race. Speaking of his own childhood experiences, Graham

described his membership in Jack and Jill, an elite organization intended to foster early and high career ambitions among black children. Membership in Jack and Jill is selective and by invitation only, and because the intergenerational transmission of class privilege is more challenging for black elites, the organization focuses on exposing children to a wide range of prominent black professionals. Attending one meeting as a professional role model, he overheard one mother steer her 12-year-old daughter away from her dream of a career in advertising or entertainment by saying,

Laura needs to be a professional. I'm a professional, her father is a professional, and three of her four grandparents were professionals. . . . She's not going to start her life off by setting us back two generations. (P. 20)

The upper-class women in Ostrander's (1984) study had fairly high rates of fertility and emphasized especially "being there" for their children, organizing their activities around their children's schedules. But they clearly expect schools and other social organizations to aid them in instilling the proper values in their children. Elite educational institutions play an important role in socializing upper-class children, as do clubs, organizations, and activities. Kendall (2002) found elite schools emphasize their efforts to educate the "whole child" and focus on tradition, active and responsible citizenship and leadership, cultivating the individual interests and talents of students, and the importance of alumni and parent activities in the networks students can create.

In some cases, overseeing their socialization can become more important than first-hand involvement, so the social capital that accrues from the quality of the parent-child relationship flounders. Katharine Graham (1997) recalls that she and her siblings lived for several years with their nanny in New York, while their parents resided in Washington despite having children who were aged 2, 4, 6, and a few months old. Upon reading her mother's journal, Graham concluded that "motherhood was not exactly Mother's first priority. She rarely mentioned any one of us children individually. I appear in the diary for the first time by name (or by initial, I should say) in February, 1920, two and a half years after my birth" (p. 27). She continues,

In all the turmoil of the family and our strange isolation both from our parents and from the outside world, we children were left to bring ourselves up emotionally and intellectually. We were leading lives fraught with ambivalence. It was hard to have an identity. (P. 54)

As noted earlier, many upper-class parents instill in their children a sense of *noblesse oblige*, or the need and responsibility to help others. Honor, duty,

service, and loyalty are key values emphasized in many elite boarding schools, and they often take students abroad to live, teach, or work in less advantaged countries (Cookson and Persell 1985). Parents stress that growing up privileged is not enough: **They want their children to accomplish on their own and maximize their potential, and they are able to give them the resources they need to do so.** They want them to be seen as people who contribute to the community and don't mind "pulling the purse strings" to get conformity from their children. Still, **their children have only minimal and highly structured contact with people of other races and social classes,** as they learn to perform good deeds from within the confines of the social bubble or under the supervision of responsible adults (Kendall 2002).

People who are wealthy live privileged lives, but wealth **does not exempt families from experiencing difficulties and hardships.** In fact, it may exert pressure on them to obscure some of those problems:

You are never to talk about what is wrong in your life, only what was right. You live with the fear that family problems will come out. When I was a young bride and a young mother, the pressure to have things going perfectly was agonizing. (Ostrander 1984:30)

In addition, the childrearing practices of economically privileged parents do not always prepare children for effectively managing their own lives. Nelson Aldrich, a cousin of the Rockefellers, said the parents with old money once handed it over to their children with little advice on how to use it:

The tradition when I was growing up was that you went to a meeting at the law firm of Choate Hall & Stewart in Boston and the family lawyer would explain the terms of the trust that you were going to live on for the rest of your life and that was it. There was no education. You took the backseat to your advisers and trust experts. It was just madness. We had zero training. (Frank 2007:226)

Although there are some remarkable continuities in the cultures and lifestyles of the upper class (e.g., lavish lifestyles, extensive travel, the emphasis on social graces, the investment in children, education), **some of its newest members are challenging those traditions.** Robert Frank (2007) argues that one of the **major characteristics of the new rich is their diversity.** In describing the newly rich, or the "Richistanis," he writes,

Richistanis like to think of themselves as ordinary people, albeit with extraordinary fortunes. They **go out of their way to appear normal.** Richistanis wear polo

shirts, casual slacks, and open-collar dress shirts, forsaking the old uniform of monogrammed shirts and suits. . . . Richistanis describe themselves as “down to earth,” even as they take off in their private Gulfstreams. (Frank 2007:75–76)

In a similar vein, Brooks (2000) notes that **some of the radicals of the 1960s have become a part of the new upper class, and they bring to their new class position a critique of conformity to outmoded traditions such as carefully defined gender roles and elitism.** He sees them as meritocrats who define themselves more by their accomplishments than their ancestry; still, they seem to have broadened, rather than challenged, the meaning of being in the upper class.

Conclusion

Although research on upper-class families remains fairly sparse, existing literature does provide notable insights into their marital patterns, gender relations, and childrearing strategies. One observation is the continuity of traditions, despite the evolving composition of those who are members of the elite. For example, despite transformations in the roles of women, boarding school curriculums still assume girls are destined to be wives and mothers and need less mental and career preparation than boys (Cookson and Persell 1985), and women often have subordinate marital roles. Although elite women are often extremely active in volunteer and community work, their lives remain fairly invisible, save stories about their work as fundraisers or hosts of debutante balls (Kendall 2002). A recent article in *The Economist* (“Dancing in the Downturn” 2009) noted that the **coming-of-age ritual of debutante balls has survived changing gender roles and the bad economy;** they attract numerous college-age women, often wearing dresses that cost several thousand dollars.

The tension among elite agriculturalists, merchants, and industrialists may no longer exist, but there are **still status and ideological differences between old and new members of the upper class.** The newly rich often entered the upper class via education and meritocracy rather than inheritance and family name, and they have introduced new lifestyles (Brooks 2003; Frank 2007). Early researchers such as Digby Baltzell (1958) favored political and economic dominance by the elite but hoped they would assimilate talented people from less privileged groups, including women and racial minorities. Caste barriers to class mobility weakened during the 1960s and 1970s, but a notable reversal occurred in the following decades, when **economic inequality and downward mobility increased, narrowing the opportunity for entry into the upper class.**