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A Place in Town

Doing Class in a Coffee Shop

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How do socioeconomic differences take on meaning in our daily interactions? Each morning for a summer I joined nine women in a coffee shop in a small rural town. In this public setting, I observed how women “do” class. During interaction, women use work, family, and leisure-related behaviors, values, and tastes associated with socioeconomic positions in the process of class categorization. No set hierarchy results from this process, however. Rather, what emerges from the Coffee Shop is that doing class involves an ongoing struggle to situate one’s own class category higher, not lower, than the others.

Keywords: *class; women; interaction*

The Coffee Shop is a small breakfast and lunch spot in a rural fishing community. It is in an historic building, painted white with green trim and awning. At the beginning of the 1900s, it was the town post office, with a soda shop and ice cream parlor in the front. Mr. Green was the postmaster, Mrs. Green worked in the store, the children helped out, and the whole family lived in the apartment upstairs. Through the end of the 1900s, the Coffee Shop had not changed much and the sign on the front still reads “Green’s Store.”

During the summer of 1996, when you opened the screen door to enter the Coffee Shop, the lunch counter was to the left. The menus above the counter listed coffee for 50 cents, ice cream for a dollar, and sandwiches for a few dollars. The rest of the shop was filled with six bistro tables and chairs. In the back there was penny candy for sale, a magazine rack, and a small gift shop.

The Coffee Shop sits in the middle of the town of 500 permanent, year-round residents. To me and the tourists who passed through the shop, the Coffee Shop first appears to be a friendly spot for local women to gather. Tricia, who managed the store, described the gathering spot as “Joe’s Bar for women.” After becoming a regular myself, however, I began to notice patterns in the interaction between women. The women did not all socialize together. Instead, they segregated themselves into distinct groups.

These groups discussed different topics and behaved in unique ways. The interaction between the groups of women was characterized by patterned association and avoidance.

In this paper, I describe the interactions of women in the public space of the Coffee Shop over the course of a summer. In doing so, I provide an example of how social class is “done” during interaction. In the way they act and treat others, the women assign themselves and each other to classes. Class categorization is something the women do during their time in the Coffee Shop. Embedded in this process is a constant negotiation for a place in the stratification system with no clear ranking emerging.

Theory

Twenty-five years ago, Elijah Anderson (1976) wrote *A Place on the Corner*, an ethnographic study of the men who frequent an urban bar and liquor store. By hanging out with, observing, and listening to the men in a public place, Anderson uncovered the localized aspects of stratification systems. Through interaction, including how “people defer to one another, are deferred to, ally themselves with certain others, and help prop up the identity of valued members of the respective crowds,” individuals collectively create systems of social status and rank (Anderson 1976, 216).

Thirty-five years before that, Warner and Lunt (1941) conducted their classic community study of Yankee City, in which they also argue that social classes are rooted in social interaction. In the community, Warner and Lunt found six social classes. At first, following most research and theories of class, they believed the basis of the classes to be economic. Yet as they spent more time in the community, they concluded that membership to one of the six classes emerged from behaviors and interactions. Regardless of their occupation and income, individuals and families had to act a certain way to be considered part of a certain class. The actions associated with class membership, which he called “symbolic behavior,” included tastes in home decorations, reading material, magazine subscriptions, attendance at the local movie theatre, and organization membership. In addition, selectively interacting with those individuals with shared symbolic behavior and avoiding those who are different further confirmed membership to a social class (Warner and Lunt 1941, 1942).

Differential access to wealth, income, and education unquestionably provides uneven opportunities in life. However, as Randall Collins (2000) emphasizes, considering macrolevel socioeconomic differences is not enough.

It is important for sociologists to consider how macro differences in material positions play out in micro situations. He writes,

Microsituational encounters are the ground zero of all social action and all sociological evidence. Nothing has reality unless it is manifest in a situation somewhere. . . . We need to undertake a series of studies looking at the conversion of abstract macrodistributions, which we have constructed by taking survey aggregations as if they were real things with fixed transsituational values, into the actual distribution of advantages in situational practice. (Collins 2000, 18)

Thus, it is in micro situations that the consequences of class are felt in our daily lives. From a “doing class” perspective, the micro situation is where class comes to exist.

In their ethnomethodologically informed approach, West and Fenstermaker (1995) describe social class as is something we “do” during interaction. As with gender and race, there are objective differences between people based on socioeconomic position. People have different amounts of wealth, income, education, and occupational power. But also as with gender and race, these differences, without socially defined meaning, would have limited consequences in our interactions. Indeed in most situations, as Collins (2000) notes, the balance in one’s bank account, years of education, or type of work one does would remain unknown. One’s socioeconomic position has consequence in interaction as people “do” class. Behaviors, tastes, and values become socially defined as appropriate and expected for a given socioeconomic position and thereby represent association with different levels of wealth, income, education, and occupational prestige. The meaning of behaviors, tastes, and values can be widely recognized and shared, such as connecting the opera with wealth and NASCAR with physical work, or they can be locally defined and created. The meanings can shift with time, such as golf moving from an upper-class sport played in exclusive and restrictive country clubs to a sport of mass appeal played on public courses and watched on the golf channel. It is during interaction, when individuals act according to these tastes and behaviors associated with socioeconomic position (whether or not they correspond with one’s actual wealth, income, or education), that class categories are created and re-created and class is accomplished. Thus, class is not something that we are, but something we do (West and Fenstermaker 1993). As West and Fenstermaker (1993, 26) argue, “There is no denying the very different material realities imposed by differing relations under capital, however, we suggest that these relations have little to do with class categorizations.”

The process of doing class is so entrenched in our interactions that classed behaviors seem nearly innate to socioeconomic positions. Bourdieu (1984) implies this innateness when he uses his concept of *habitus* to argue that individuals develop unconscious worldviews based on their structural, socioeconomic positions that determine their tastes and behaviors. Individuals of a given socioeconomic position are held accountable for acting according to roles defined as associated with that position. In this paper, however, I argue that tastes and behaviors do not merely emerge from structural positions; instead, individuals ascribe different tastes, values, and behaviors to socioeconomic positions and then act according to these tastes, values, and behaviors during interaction to group themselves with people who are similar and to distance themselves from those who are different. Class categories are created and continually reinforced during these ongoing interactions.

Methods

In the spring of 1996, I came to the town with a set of research questions, some hypotheses, an interview guide, some cassette tapes, and a tape recorder. I had developed my research questions and hypotheses from existing literature. Quickly I learned that the assumptions I had made were wrong and that my interview guide, focusing on relatively personal questions about marriage and family, was not going to work in a small town where everyone knew each other and no one knew me.

To fill my days while I regrouped, I began spending time in the Coffee Shop. What I found there excited me, because I knew I had come across something important. I joined the women in the Coffee Shop nearly every morning for 5 months, until it closed for the winter months. As we talked, I listened for what women discussed, how they talked about themselves, others, and life in the town. I heard what information they shared openly and daily and what information they kept out of conversation. I watched how the women acted within the public space. I observed how they treated others—what they said and how they behaved toward them. I saw which women shared close social networks, who sat and talked with whom, and who avoided whom.

I recorded data gathered through participant observation in field notes. I recorded information as soon after the observation or discussion as possible by tape-recording or jotting notes. I wrote up these notes and information in the research diary I kept every day while in the field. While there is the possibility of inaccuracies when using this method, the steps I took in recording data assured that the information would be as accurate as possible (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

In this setting, I was introduced to the social class system among women in the town. I watched the daily patterns in interaction which persisted over time. The interactions I observed were not rare, insignificant actions, but were daily, reoccurring acts by women. The actions resulted in substantial divisions between the women who gathered in this public spot. Women displayed these aspects of their lives, through conversation and actions, in distinct ways and acted toward others so as to reinforce these distinctions. I sought to understand how and why women acted in these ways.

To understand what was happening in the Coffee Shop, I placed the interactions I observed among the women within the broader context of the town. As Zussman (2004, 352) argues, “[Q]ualitative sociology works best when it addresses *people in places*.” To do this, I used a combination of ethnographic techniques, including participant observation and in-depth interviews. I lived in the town for two summers, one spring, and one fall season, during which time I became as much a part of the community as possible. In addition to spending each morning in the Coffee Shop, I worked at the Diner, a local restaurant; attended community events; read in the public library; ate occasionally at the Dining Room, a formal restaurant; went for runs on the summer colony; and spent many hours talking with town residents. Many of these conversations were informal, but I also conducted tape-recorded, in-depth interviews with 44 white women in the town, including most of the women in the Coffee Shop (Yodanis 2002), and prominent male town residents. The interviews were analyzed using ground theory and constant comparative approaches (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Ragin 1987).

These diverse methodological approaches make it possible to observe behaviors and interactions, which are central to the “doing” perspective (West and Fenstermaker 1995), and to understand these interactions based on both how actors describe their actions and the larger social context within which the actors live. This method combines naturalist and constructionist approaches (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Harris 2003). I seek to understand the meaning of social class in the Coffee Shop from observing patterns in what the town residents did and said. There is a risk, particularly in the observational data, that I may be imposing my own meaning on what was occurring. But I argue that I was a participant in the social construction process and that the meaning of the interactions for me emerged from my own experience in the town and Coffee Shop. My analysis, thus, is based in experience in the social context rather than completely foreign, outside observation. Furthermore, what I report are patterned and often reoccurring actions and interactions. Any one, isolated action in the Coffee Shop may have a number of alternative explanations, but more evidence emerges for the argument I make when considering the whole collection of

patterned, repeated actions. Given this, however, I admit that—if asked directly and in detail—the various women I studied might tell somewhat different stories about what is occurring in the Coffee Shop than the one I offer in this article (Harris 2003). A more discursive approach might reveal more diverse meanings of inequality, but would risk missing some of the nonverbal, class-producing interactions I have included in my analysis.

Relatedly, before moving forward, there are some important caveats I should make. I use the categories of working, middle, and upper class to describe the groups of women. It is important to note, however, that the women (as is common among many Americans) do not use the word “class” to describe their actions. Instead they use euphemisms for class such as “level,” “elite,” or “never had to work.” Finally, while these terms signify a hierarchy, an important finding of this paper is that while women used symbols of socioeconomic position during interaction to construct a social class system in the Coffee Shop and situate themselves in that system, the ranking that emerged from these actions was neither fixed nor unambiguous. The three groups continually negotiated for status relative to other groups, and all groups—working, middle, and upper class—defined themselves as superior in some ways and inferior in no way to the others.

The Coffee Shop

The Coffee Shop sits in the middle of an interesting town. Situated on a remote coast, most of the full-time, year-round residents work in the fishing or small tourist industry. A number of residents also work for summer residents on the exclusive colony of mansions to the south of the town. Since the 1800s the summer residents have had a striking influence over the local residents, providing not only employment but also financial support to the town, including funding for the town library and medical center and individual families (paying for houses and cars). There are also a number of other “people from away,” who have moved to the area. Some of these people are affiliated with the military base, sitting to the north of the town. Others are back-to-the-landers who moved to the town over the past decades to enjoy the slower pace of rural life and work on their art or farms. The symbolic meaning of these diverse populations for the year-round residents of the town comes into play as they do class in the Coffee Shop.

Each weekday morning from 8:00 until 10:30, nine women and I came to the Coffee Shop. Although these women have known each other for years and some for their whole lives, they segregated themselves into groups.

Nancy, Sharon, and Holly sat at the counter. They were the first to arrive when the Coffee Shop opened at 8:00 and sat at their "regular stools" at the counter, rarely turning around to even acknowledge the other women in the Coffee Shop. Around 9:15, Gigi, Jean, and Helen arrived and sat together at a table toward the front of the Coffee Shop. Guests visited their table only when invited, and invitations were infrequent. Amy, Dorothy, and Tricia formed a third group. They sat at the far back table. They got together less regularly than the other women, but were in the Coffee Shop at least a few days each week.

These seating arrangements, which were rarely if ever violated, were the most obvious way in which women created boundaries and distinctions among themselves. These arrangements were a challenge for me. I wanted to be part of all groups, but I found it was very difficult to do. I could sit with the women at the counter when they were there alone. However, when the women at the front table arrived, I was always invited by them to join their table and felt pressure until I moved. Then it was hard to leave these women to sit with other groups. As a result, while I tried to divide my time evenly between groups, I spent the most time with Gigi, Jean, and Helen.

While observing and experiencing the rigid segregation, I began to also understand the basis of the groups. When considering social class, socioeconomic differences come to mind first. Therefore, in this section, I lay out the differences between the women in socioeconomic position. In the rest of the paper, however, I show how social class is not merely based in structural socioeconomic differences. Rather, social class was "done" each morning in the Coffee Shop.

While there are similarities across the groups and important exceptions within each group, the groups tended to be somewhat differentiated by levels of education, occupation, and income and wealth. The women at the counter tend to have lower socioeconomic positions. Nancy and her husband have high school degrees. She worked for years as a cook, at local factories and fish dealers, as a housekeeper, and as a clerk at local stores. Recently, she got a job as a teacher's aide. While school was out for the summer, she was not working for pay. Her husband works on fishing boats and as a maintenance worker. Sharon did not graduate from high school, but her husband did. During the summer of 1996, she worked at the fish plant in the neighboring town and has worked at a number of factories and as a housekeeper throughout the years. Her husband works for a local construction company. Holly graduated from technical school and has some college education. She worked at the Coffee Shop, as a nurse's aide, and as a housekeeper. Her partner has a high school degree and works as a fisherman.

In comparison, the women at the front table are generally wealthier. Gigi is from the elite summer colony. Her husband is a lawyer, and she is president of the women's board of a hospital in her home city. During the summer, she had no work to do. Helen is also of a higher socioeconomic status. She has a college degree and her husband has a PhD. She has worked intermittently for pay throughout her life. During the summer, she was in the Women's Club, works in the library, and volunteers for retirement homes. Jean is an interesting exception, because compared to the other women she is not wealthy. She has technical school training and is a home-duty nurse's aide. She is also active in many community organizations. She was not married, but her former husband was in the military.

Among the final group of women at the back table, Tricia managed the Coffee Shop during the summer season and worked for pay sporadically during winter, making wreaths or assisting at a day care. She has a college degree, but her husband did not go to school beyond high school. He works as a gardener for the summer colony. Dorothy has technical school training and works part-time as a secretary. Her husband also has technical training and owns a small retail store. Amy went to college for a while but did not complete her degree. She works sporadically for pay throughout the year as a substitute teacher, in retail stores, and making crafts to sell. Her husband has some technical school training and is a fisherman.

So there are socioeconomic differences between the women. Nonetheless, differences in income, occupational prestige, and education in and of themselves were not sufficient for creating class categorization. Within the seating arrangements that physically created the groups, the women continually use or reject behaviors, tastes, and values during interaction to categorize themselves and the other women into three classes. As a result, Nancy, Sharon, and Holly became working-class women, with a strong work ethic. Gigi, Helen, and Jean became upper-class women, enjoying high culture and fine dining and dedicated to their volunteer work. Tricia, Dorothy, and Amy became new middle-class women, dedicated to intellectual and liberal, politically active pursuits. In the rest of the paper, I describe these interactions, based in different orientations to work, leisure, and family, which I observed during my time in the Coffee Shop.

Work

In the Coffee Shop, different orientations toward work were continually acted out. While in the Coffee Shop, the working-class women worked and

talked about work. Even when hanging out in a restaurant, a supposed leisure activity, they managed to work. Among Nancy, Sharon, and Holly, the overwhelming topic of conversation was work. While at the Coffee Shop, they often commented on how they are being lazy or a “slug” by sitting around. Yet their actions and conversations always contradicted this. They came into the Coffee Shop the earliest and left the soonest. While sitting having coffee, they discussed the paid or household work they did before or would do after leaving the shop. Nancy, who was not employed for the summer, emphasized work by talking about the housework she did. One day, Nancy came into the Coffee Shop, sat at the counter, and said that “[yesterday] I finished 4-5 loads of laundry and hung them out to dry before coming here. When I got back, they were all dry and I folded them and put them away.” Her time at the Coffee Shop was thus time for the clothes to dry. Nearly everyday when leaving, she stood up and stated that she needed to leave in order to “get something done,” whether mowing her mother’s lawn, baking or cooking, or running to the next town for errands. Describing the amount of work they did became almost competitive between the working-class women, as this example from my field notes shows.

Before they left, Nancy and Sharon talked about housework. Nancy said that she had to leave to get something done. Then they both described the amount of work they had done the day before. Nancy said that she did a load of laundry, washed the windows inside and out, and dusted. Later in the day, she took her mother to [the neighboring town] to the doctors. . . . It was then Sharon’s turn to compare what all she did. She worked at the fish plant and then came home and did housework, including laundry and mowed the lawn. She said that when you are working it is amazing how fast the other time goes.

The most obvious behavior was the work that Nancy and Holly did while at the Coffee Shop. Holly was employed at the Coffee Shop and rarely sat to talk. Instead, she held conversations from behind the counter while she washed dishes, prepared food, and cleaned up. When Holly was in the Coffee Shop and not working, she was always stopping on her way to her other nursing or housekeeping work. Although not employed at the Coffee Shop, Nancy frequently worked while there. She got up from her stool and did the dishes, made egg salad or coffee, or changed the displays. She started doing this without pay, but later in the summer was asked to fill in on the weekends for pay. Yet, she continued to help out during the week even if she was not on the payroll.

At times, Sharon did not come to the Coffee Shop for a few days. When she did return, she would report that she had been working double shifts at

the fish plant, and she talked about the hours she put in this week and how she only got one day off a week. She also showed her hands and the cuts, dirty nails, and stained fingers as a sign of her work at the factory.

The working-class women used these values to distinguish themselves from others. In addition to acting out their work ethic, the working-class women talked about how lazy others are. Holly, who cleans houses for the summer colony, was telling me about how the job varies depending on the family. She told the story about one family who never puts the new roll of toilet paper on the holder. They always just put it on top, and she has to put it on the holder. She said she really doesn't understand—they have nothing else to do while they are just sitting there, so can't they just do that one simple job? She also told me the following story during our interview:

[The summer colony residents] just don't have anything, there is one woman that comes in and sits in [the Coffee Shop] and she will sit there and complain about things like, her husband last night left a blanket on the sofa and didn't fold it, it's like if that's all you have to worry about. That's the thing, they just have different ways about them because they have always had everything. I think they have never had to struggle or anything. They are just really different. I don't know how to explain it. That really boggled my mind that day. There was two women sitting there talking about it and one of them was saying, "Oh, you know what my husband did" and he didn't put his glass in the dishwasher, he will leave them in the sink. . . . It's just amazing the stuff they talk about and they start on other people. That's the last thing on most people's mind—it's kind of sickening really.

At the same time, however, the other women in the Coffee Shop treated the working-class women as inferior based on these values. They were treated by the other women as being lazy, although they were the only women working while at the Coffee Shop. Although they were there far fewer hours than the other women, the other women and customers would comment on how often they were in the Coffee Shop. It was not uncommon to hear someone say to Nancy, "You should have your name engraved in that stool." They were often asked if they were "working hard" and were praised when they started a new job. For example, Sharon had been working double shifts for most of the summer at the fish-processing plant. The work is hard, hot, and dirty. She had only one day off a week. Yet, the following excerpts from my field notes show how the other women view her:

Jean [an upper-class woman] came into the Coffee Shop. Sharon was sitting at the counter and said that she had worked 13 days in a row. Jean asked in a very

condescending way, "So you got a job? Where are you working?" and then after Sharon answers, she said, "Now you finally have work and now you are working too hard. . . . You jumped right into it. You went from nothing to overtime."

So while the working-class women acted out a strong work ethic, the other women acted to undermine and downgrade their orientations and values. This created bounded categories between the women and began the struggle for hierarchies between the groups.

In sharp contrast, the upper-class women acted according to a volunteer rather than a paid work ethic. In the Coffee Shop, Gigi, Jean, and Helen were all highly involved in community organizations and presented this work as their primary concern whether or not they also worked for pay. When they said, "I have to work," they were referring to their community activities. They frequently talked about the unpaid community work that they were doing and often left stating that they had some community work to conduct. Gigi had to return to the city because September was going to be a busy month for the women's board at the hospital. Helen had to go to dance practice for a retirement home. Jean had to sell tickets to raise money for a new roof for a historic hall in town.

Jean does not have the socioeconomic class standing of Gigi or even Helen and thus was most active in creating her class category through interaction in the Coffee Shop. She is a good example of how class categorization does not necessarily correspond to one's socioeconomic position. Nearly everyday, Jean talked about the unpaid work she was conducting in the town, noting how important this work is to the social foundation of the town. Jean talked about the many hours she puts into running the plays and described the plays as providing worthwhile leisure activities and cultural experiences for the young people in town. She discussed the scholarships and charity work which were conducted by the Women's Club. She mentioned the "anonymous" charity work that she did on her own. She distributed and posted fliers advertising the plays or fundraisers which she organized. She sold tickets for community events from the card table that she set up on the sidewalk right outside of the Coffee Shop. She would laugh and call the Coffee Shop her "office" for her community work.

Describing their time in the Coffee Shop, Jean, Gigi, and Helen explained "that is what we do here, we form a community." They sat near the door and watched and greeted everyone who came into the Coffee Shop. They saw these actions as important for building community and presented themselves as community-minded residents. As compared to the working-class women, they stayed the longest at the Coffee Shop.

While acting as volunteers, the upper-class women never acted as paid workers. Helen and Gigi did not work for pay. Jean, on the other hand, financially needed to work for pay. She worked as a private home nurse's aide, cleaned the summer cottage that her sister owns and rents, and filled in for her friend at his art shop. She worked anywhere from 3 to 6 days a week, but never discussed her paid work in the Coffee Shop. When listing her day's activities, her paid work was never mentioned. On days when she was unable to come to the Coffee Shop because she had to work, she did not provide an explanation unless she was asked directly and then only gave a brief answer. When she did talk about her work as a nurse's aide, she discussed it in terms of volunteer work. She was "taking care of an older woman in town" or "giving a massage to a woman who had an injury."

The upper-class women also used their work values in an effort to gain status in the class hierarchy of the Coffee Shop. The upper-class women distinguished themselves from others by talking about the apathy in town, referring to the lack of interest in joining community organizations or volunteering for tasks or positions within the organizations. Jean frequently talked about the frustration she felt when others were not willing to help and often criticized the projects that she sees as so essential to the community. Gigi and Helen agreed and saw it within their own community work.

The upper-class women also performed "charity work" for the working-class women in the Coffee Shop. The following example from my field notes illustrates this.

Jean came up to Nancy, a working class woman, and said, "We wear the same size shoe, right?" and gave her the shoes off of her feet to try on. Jean said she couldn't keep them on her feet because they are too narrow. Nancy half-heartedly tried them on without taking off her thick white socks and said that her feet were too wide for them.

The efforts of the upper-class women to gain superior positions relative to the other women were furthered by treating the other women as if they were working for them. This was most obvious when there was a true employer-employee relationship, as there was between Gigi and Sharon's son. While in the Coffee Shop, Gigi would talk about the work that she needed Sharon's son to do for her. My field notes illustrate this:

Gigi told Sharon that she needed her son, Bob, to take her husband to the airport. Gigi didn't know if Bob could get off work early to do it, but she couldn't go because she had a meeting and doesn't like to drive at night. Sharon said that she would go to where he works and ask him as soon as she left the Coffee Shop.

The employer-employee treatment, however, continued into other interactions. Although Holly's brother works for a law firm in Washington, D.C., Gigi treated him as her employee when he was in town on vacation. When he was younger, he used to detail her car for \$50 and do, as she reported, a really good job. Now when she took it to a garage, they charged \$125 and did a poor job. When he came into the Coffee Shop to visit Holly, Gigi asked if he was looking for any work while he was home. He was friendly, but said, "No, I am on vacation."

In other examples, Helen and Jean talked about how they would like to take Tricia, who manages the Coffee Shop, to lunch again this year. They explained to me that they took her out to lunch last fall after the Coffee Shop closed because "she waits on us all the time, we wanted to do something for her." Another time, Jean explained, "I really enjoy Tricia and she does know what I like and caters to each of us that go in there." The upper-class women defined their time in the Coffee Shop as being "waited on" and "catered to." Through their emphasis on their own volunteer work over paid work in their daily interactions as well as their treatment of the other women as employees, the upper-class women categorized themselves as upper class and sought a dominant position in the class system of the Coffee Shop.

The middle-class women acted according to yet another orientation toward work—a commitment to progressive, political work—in the process of doing class and being categorized as members of the new middle class of intellectual, liberal professionals. In complete contrast to the working-class women, they lacked a paid work ethic and openly share it. Like the upper-class women, they kept later hours at the Coffee Shop, often hanging out until the middle of the afternoon. While Holly and Nancy, working-class women, worked in the Coffee Shop, Tricia, who also worked at the Coffee Shop, left her work and joined Amy and Dorothy at their table in the back. In my first conversation with Amy at the Coffee Shop, she presented her lack of a paid work ethic to me when she told me, "The two most important things about the Protestant work ethic is that religion should be first and the work should be second in importance, and neither are very important to me."

Tricia, Amy, and Dorothy are political. They are all involved in local politics, serving on the school board and other committees, and this work was a near daily topic of conversation at the Coffee Shop. Who was at the town meeting? When will the teachers' contract be settled? If the military leaves, how will that impact the town? Will the town buy the water company? They also talked about national and state politics—public policies, the presidential campaigns, and the candidates for state government. Tricia closed the Coffee

Shop or had someone fill in for her so that she could do work for the school board in the state capital.

Their political orientation was very specific, however. They defined themselves as “liberal” and presented themselves as such. They distinguished themselves from the people in the town who have sexist, homophobic, and racist ideas and acted as social change agents trying to enlighten people to change their backward ideas. The following notes of a conversation with Tricia at the Coffee Shop show these orientations:

We talked about Clinton winning and the Christian Right. . . . She said that she doesn't understand why there is such fear about gay men and lesbians. . . . She said that at first she was shocked when she heard people use the term “colored” but now hears it all the time. . . . She told the story about how [a woman in town] didn't let her daughter go to the African drumming and dance performance that they brought to the grammar school because “you can't trust black people.”

Actions of the middle-class women confirmed their values. Amy parked her van, with a bumper sticker supporting gay and lesbian rights, outside of the Coffee Shop. During a referendum regarding a gay rights bill, Tricia wore a button to work which revealed her support for gay and lesbian rights. She listened to National Public Radio while working.

The Coffee Shop is a public place where women “do class.” The women could have just done different jobs and work outside of their time at the Coffee Shop, but that would not necessarily translate into categorization into particular social classes. Without acting according to class-associated work values and orientations, they would not be identified as members of a particular social class based on their work. By doing hard work, Nancy, Sharon, and Holly acted to be categorized as working class; while emphasizing volunteer work, Gigi, Helen, and Jean sought categorization as upper class; and through their political work, Amy, Tricia, and Dorothy did class as intellectual, liberals of the new middle class. I argue here that these repeated, patterned actions were not random but rather involved the women acting according to behaviors and values associated with a particular social class. These behaviors categorized women into social classes in their daily interactions in the Coffee Shop.

Leisure

As with work values and orientations, the women in the Coffee Shop also used leisure in the process of doing class. In this section, I show how their

tastes for leisure activities were used in interaction for class categorization. In other words, preferences in leisure do not just emerge from socioeconomic positions but are in fact used to place meaning on and categorize people according to these differences.

The working-class women downplayed leisure as they emphasized their work ethic. Nonwork activities were rarely a topic of conversation. When I would ask Nancy or Sharon, "How was your weekend?" or "Did you get to enjoy this beautiful day?" they answered according to how productive the day or weekend was, such as "I got a lot done" or "Didn't get enough done."

The working-class women shunned any orientation toward high culture. They do not travel, even to nearby places. One day, a young woman was talking about traveling to a nearby state to attend a concert. Nancy said that she has relatives in that state but hasn't been down there for 23 years. In the fall, Holly and her boyfriend took their first trip to the neighboring state. The following is another example from my field notes:

Sharon was going to go to a local county fair on Saturday. . . . I asked Holly if she was going and she said she didn't think so. She said that it is too dirty, that you come back with dirt all over you. Plus it was expensive and they were saving their money for vacation next week. Sharon started in on her right away. "It is a fair, what do you want? . . . Just wear old clothes. Why don't you just go up to Mr. Rudolph's [prominent summer colony resident] and stay up there. You think you are all hoity-toity now that you are working up there. Why don't you just go and live in Philadelphia [where many of the summer residents are from]?"

When Holly criticized a local cultural event as something she did not want to participate in, Sharon held her accountable for acting working class by being quick to remind her that she was violating her working-class category by being like the summer residents.

Among the upper-class women, Gigi, a member of the elite summer colony, was the clearest symbol used by Jean and Helen in their leisure. By sitting and being seen with Gigi, leisure time was very important for acting out affiliation with the summer colony, and Gigi's friendship continued to be used in interaction even when she was not there. For example, after Gigi had returned to her permanent residence in the fall, she wrote a note to Jean. In the setting of the Coffee Shop, Jean shared the letter with the women in the Coffee Shop, demonstrating her personal ties and knowledge of Gigi:

Jean announced that she got a card from Gigi. She said that "She said to say Hi to everyone, Helen, Carrie, Tricia and someone else. . . . Oh, Sharon" (and

laughed). “She will be back at the end of October. She said that she is back into her routine which she enjoys although she ‘whines’ about it a lot. She is such a real person.”

In contrast to the working-class women, the upper-class women frequently discussed their leisure activities, in particular those related to high culture. Indeed, discussion of high culture dominated their daily conversations. They discussed experiences in Europe and tropical vacation spots. Almost 20 years ago, Jean lived in Germany, Hawaii, and the Philippines as a result of her former husband’s military career. Yet, she used these experiences in her interactions to display orientations toward high travel. Everyday, even when quite irrelevant, Jean reminded women in the Coffee Shop that she had lived in these exotic locations. The following field notes provide examples:

Jean talked about moving around with her husband and always starting new. She said that she has never felt roots anywhere. . . . She has gotten used to moving. She talked about living in the Philippines and how the gardener asked her to keep her urine. She was unclear what he was talking about so she asked the maid. Turns out, she said, Americans have enriched urine because of the food they eat and it is helpful for the plants. They—she and her gardener—started talking because she had recognized the flowers in the garden because she had seen them when she lived in Hawaii.

Thus, no matter what the topic of conversation, Jean managed to insert her travel experiences. Her actions reinforced these presentations. One day, she brought me a stack of *Condé Nast Traveler* magazines. The vacation spots covered in the magazines range from “55 Islands of Desire” to Rome, Thailand, and Latin America. Although she had not been outside of the country since her divorce and her travel was a result of military assignments rather than exotic vacations, both her subscription to this magazine and bringing them to the Coffee Shop were important actions in her display and creation of class category. In contrast, although Amy, another woman in the Coffee Shop, also lived in Europe as a result of her husband’s work in the military, she never discussed her experiences as engaging in high culture.

Tastes for high culture pervade their actions. One day, Jean explained that during the afternoon she and a friend who was visiting were planning to have tea at 4:00 on the rocky shore of the summer colony. Her friend’s sister in law, a concert flutist who teaches at a private school, was going to play the flute. Helen, nearly every day, talked about listening to classical music and attending musical performances. She shared her knowledge about high culture by

listing performers and evaluating the technical quality of performances. Jean kept everyone updated on the progress of the local plays she was organizing. She brought in a tape of classical music to share with Helen. The upper-class women openly made plans to attend the opera and the local plays together, excluding the other women in the Coffee Shop.

At the same time, the upper-class women showed disdain for the local working-class culture of the town. In doing so, they continued to categorize themselves as upper class and strove to gain a superior position relative to the working class. They talked openly about avoiding the Diner, a casual seafood restaurant in town where many of the fishermen and other local families hang out. Their criticism centered on the atmosphere, which they did not see as on their level. Jean said she doesn't like the Diner: "I am going to sound snobby, but [pause] it is the level of conversation that goes on." They defined their social time and conversation at the Coffee Shop as being on a higher level:

Jean said that she saw [the wife of a wealthy man in town] and told her that she gets together with a group [of] women at the Coffee Shop everyday at 9:30 and that she should join us. In describing the Coffee Shop, she told the woman that they don't "gossip." In comparison, she talked about how we seem to know everything but it is "information" not gossip. Helen said that the difference between information and gossip is what you do with it.

At the end of the conversation (about families, dreams, and disliking television), Jean turned to me and said that this is great that we talked about these topics. She said that this is why she misses it in the winter. She said, "We don't gossip like all the other groups." In my interview with Jean, her class analysis of the Diner is quite clear.

When I go to the Diner I feel like I am stuck. I have been commented on and watched and undressed and everything as I walk into the place and I finally can slither into a booth. . . . I am not better than they are, I don't mean to, but it's just not a level that I want to live at. . . . You always hear so much talk about the people after they have gone, when you're sitting up there at the Diner and the ridicule and whatever. I just don't want to be part of the conversation. . . . I don't find it a great cultural experience to go up to the Diner.

The Diner is not the "level" she wants to live on.

In comparison, upper-class women often discussed dinner at the Dining Room, a more formal, expensive seafood restaurant, where residents of the summer colony often ate. They talked about the excellent meals they had and

the good service they received. They invited me to meet them at the Dining Room for dinner. As Jean explained one day, she and a friend wanted to go to dinner, but she was getting sick of the Dining Room because they went so frequently.

Related to this, Jean had very high standards for service at the Coffee Shop, which other women approached as very casual. Everyday when she came in, she demanded that her service be prompt and that her tea and popcorn were prepared just right. She got visibly upset and annoyed if she did not receive the service she expected. As I explain in my field notes,

Jean came in when Holly was working. Tricia usually has her popcorn basket and tea ready for when she comes in. . . . Jean gets very impatient if it is not all set up. . . . Today, the water pot was on warm rather than boil so the water took a while to boil and Holly didn't know what was wrong. Jean got very impatient—she got up and checked over the counter and told Holly to check the water. In a cutesy yet firm way, she said, "I am not going to drink coffee in the morning."

Thus, by using their tastes for high culture in interactions, the upper-class women acted to construct themselves as not only different from but also superior to the other women.

Like the upper class and unlike the working class, the middle-class women engaged in conspicuous leisure during their interactions in the Coffee Shop. For example, Tricia did not work on the weekends in the Coffee Shop. Rather, she had younger women fill the Saturday and Sunday shifts. In addition, she often took an additional day off to make the weekend longer and provide more time for leisure activities. Amy came into the Coffee Shop to socialize on days when she had turned down substitute teaching jobs because she was feeling ill.

What was unique about their leisure was the focus on new age, liberal, intellectual interests and hobbies. For example, Tricia, who manages the Coffee Shop, did the purchasing for the small gift shop in the back of the store. She included aromatherapy and environmentally friendly and Native American print greeting cards in the stock. By selecting these items for the store, Tricia displayed her class-associated values and interests. Similarly, Amy one day asked me, while ignoring the upper-class women I was sitting with, if I would like to visit an herb shop with her in a neighboring town. I agreed, and we visited two herb shops and an organic farm along the way. Throughout the trip, Amy shared her knowledge of herbs for both artistic and medicinal purposes.

The middle-class women also often discussed films and books. For example, one day they were talking about an author whose books they have all read. The author writes about Hasidic Jews. None of them are Jewish, and they all loved the books. Tricia said that she was “thrown off” by the author’s last book because it was about African Americans. She quickly explained that there was “nothing wrong” with a book about African American culture, but that she was “just really in a mood for a book about Hasidic Jews.” Another day, I referred to the movie *Bound*. Tricia, who hadn’t seen it, asked what it was about. I described it as a “lesbian Mafia movie,” to which Sharon, a working-class woman, joked, “Maybe we shouldn’t talk to Carrie anymore,” and Tricia replied, “That sounds really interesting.” Nancy and Sharon laughed with each other when Amy and Tricia talked about how much they enjoy visiting bookstores.

These values ran through all of the leisure activities they discussed in the Coffee Shop. Amy talked about the interesting guests who were on *Oprah* the day before, especially the lesbian congressperson. Tricia talked about an article she read in *Ms.* magazine. Amy talked about how she wants to visit the Holocaust Museum while visiting her children in Washington, D.C.

The middle-class women also acted out social ties with people who represented their values within the context of the Coffee Shop. Similar to how Jean used her connection to Gigi to become upper class, the middle-class women used ties to back-to-the-landers and other people “from away” as they categorized themselves as worldly and progressive. The following back-to-the-lander friends frequently stopped into the Coffee Shop to visit: Beth, a gardener with long hair and big earrings who is very “hippie” in appearance and values; local organic farmers Bob Thatcher, with a long gray beard and knitted caps, and Gwen Thatcher, who wears long skirts and hand-knitted sweaters; and Jane, who works on the Thatchers’ farm, wearing a “reduce, reuse, and recycle” T-shirt and talking about their trip to an all-organic fair. In efforts to associate themselves with those who represent their worldly, liberal values, middle-class women sometimes presented their ties as stronger than they actually are. The following field notes provide an example:

Amy came in with an androgynous woman, with short, dark hair. Tricia gave her a hug and they sat back at Amy’s usual table. Tricia soon joined them at the table and they talked for quite a while. Later, after being introduced to this woman, Amanda, I learned that she is a military instructor. I also learned that she does not know Tricia and Amy very well, although they act very close with her. She did not know their last names and who their children were.

While it first appeared when entering the Coffee Shop that all of the women were there to enjoy some leisure time, upon closer observation it became apparent that the three groups of women acted out different values and tastes toward leisure. Leisure was then used by the women to associate themselves with others seeking the same class category and to distance themselves from the other women.

Family

In the process of doing class in the Coffee Shop, women brought their family members into the action. The women in the Coffee Shop selectively used expectations and accomplishments of children as they “did” class.

The working-class women deemphasized socioeconomic mobility among their children. Instead, they encouraged them to stay and work in the town, for which a university education is not necessary and instead usually results in children moving away. Nancy’s discussion of the future plans of her 17-year-old daughter, who was soon graduating from high school, provides a good example. Nancy said her daughter’s friend left to go to school in Florida and that her daughter was dead set on going to a college outside of the state—something she discouraged. Instead, Nancy showed her preference that her daughter stays in town. A few months later, her daughter decided to enlist in the military. Nancy was afraid of her daughter traveling and being so far away from the town. One day at the Coffee Shop, Nancy said that she thought that her daughter was changing her mind and no longer wanted to leave. When pushed by other women to explain further, she admitted that her daughter never actually said that she did not want to go, but that she just sensed it. In the presentation of her daughter’s future plans, Nancy stressed the importance of maintaining her relationship with a local young man. She told other women at the Coffee Shop that she asked her daughter about her plans for her new relationship after she leaves town: “Are you going to break up and just be friends, or are you going to try to make it work?” Nancy described their relationship to the other women as “very serious,” although her daughter is only 17 and they have only been dating 2 months. Thus, within the public setting of the Coffee Shop, Nancy demonstrated how she discouraged her daughter from social mobility. Instead she presented her desire for her daughter to stay in the area and maintain a local relationship rather than travel in the military. Nancy’s daughter later took steps to retract her commitment to the military and remain in town in order to maintain her relationship with the young man. Nancy supported her decision.

What Nancy did not say in the public setting is just as important as what she did. There were aspects of her daughters' lives, especially those based in educational attainment, which Nancy did not talk about. For example, her older daughter was taking, very interested in, and doing well in Advanced Placement English classes in her high school. Yet, Nancy never mentioned this among the other women. Furthermore, her younger daughter was the only student in the local grammar school class who got straight A's consistently every semester. Yet I learned this only from reading the local newspaper. Nancy did not talk about this. She could have easily presented this information in the Coffee Shop. But in the process of "doing" class, Nancy buried her daughters' socioeconomic mobility.

In comparison, the upper-class women bragged about educational and financial success in their families. Helen, whose children have acquired the greatest educational and financial success, most frequently talked about the accomplishments of her children. She talked about her son's success in college, where he applied and was accepted to graduate school for engineering, and where he works. As the following field note shows,

Helen said that her daughter got straight "A's" because she was an over-achiever. Gigi said that her daughter, too, was an overachiever. Helen talked about her son and how he was very smart, was told to do liberal arts, but wanted to do sciences and that he was very good at science. He went to Stanford. Gigi added, "Like your husband?"

As stated before, however, what women hid is just as important as what they showed in the process of doing class. Jean rarely mentioned her two daughters who had not attained educational and occupational mobility. Her daughters had not graduated from college, do not hold prestigious jobs, and are married to men who perform physical work. Because they do not fulfill the expectations for children which correspond with her desired class category, she never mentioned her daughters in the Coffee Shop.

The middle-class women used a third set of expectations of their children during the process of class categorization in interaction. Amy, Dorothy, and Tricia neither encouraged nor discouraged socioeconomic mobility. Rather, they emphasized knowledge and worldly experiences. During our interview, Amy described her daughter as follows:

My daughter went to school in Pennsylvania and she actually remarked several times about how she felt that she was more aware of things going on in the world, like independence and getting along and that kind of stuff, than a roommate she had one year who was from New York City. . . . She is the

curious kind of a person that would be more aware. . . . Of course, everybody has their own interpretation of what success is, but Barbara is one of those kids that will definitely be a success in her eyes and in other people's eyes. It's just because she really loves life, enjoys life, is curious and wants to know. She doesn't sit down and read novels very often, but she always is reading something that non-fiction kind of things. . . . Even though she came from a small town, she's pretty with what's going on in the world and everything. And very liberal social ideas.

Here she emphasized that her daughter is not "small town" but is knowledgeable of the ways of the world, even in comparison to young women from New York City. Her knowledge came from her intellectual curiosity and being well-read. In the end, she connected her daughter's knowledge to liberal social ideas.

Tricia further illustrated these expectations for her children when she described the following hopes for her two young children:

I hope that [my son and daughter] grow up, graduate from high school and leave town for a while, at least. I hope that they go off and see something else. I am not real bent on them going to college at 17 or 18. If they want to go I will do everything I can to try to help them financially and motivationally to go to college. . . . I advise them to travel, to go off somewhere and find a job and work. I would like them to go into the Peace Corp[s]. I would like them to solidify my dream. . . . I would like them to go and see how other people live, see other cultures, and just get a bigger world education, even before they decide what they want to do. . . . I really think it's important to go off and find yourself. I still believe in that 60's thing that you need to take off and hitchhike around the country.

Like Amy, Tricia wanted her children to gain knowledge and become worldly. The thing Tricia would not tolerate would be her children doing what Nancy, a working-class woman, wanted for her daughter:

I would be real upset if [my daughter] got married when she was 18 or 19. I mean very upset. And the same with [my son]. . . . I don't want him graduating from high school, then just marrying the first girl that he dated and stay living here for the rest of his life.

Thus, the women used expectations for their children in the process of doing class. Upper-class women presented socioeconomic mobility, while the working-class women did not. The middle-class women pushed for

knowledge of and experience with diverse cultures and people outside of the small town.

Research on class and families often focuses on socioeconomic mobility from parents to children (Blau and Duncan 1967). Based on what I observe in the Coffee Shop and wider town, I suggest that as with work and leisure, children can represent class-associated values and behaviors which parents use to do their own class categorization. Veblen (1973) found that men were able to raise their status by having wives who were not employed serve as a conspicuous consumer. The men could have high incomes and prestigious jobs, but their class standing was presented by displaying a wife who bought expensive things for herself and the home. I suggest that today this role may also be filled by children. The achievements of children can be used by parents in interaction to achieve class categorization.

Conclusion

The Coffee Shop provides a setting for observing how class is “done” in microlevel interactions of everyday life. Each morning, women were continually creating and re-creating local social class distinctions and working to categorize themselves into social classes. They did this by acting against or according to behaviors and tastes which are associated with a particular socioeconomic position. They also selectively associated with or distinguished themselves from other women and acted to gain status relative to other women based on their behaviors, values, and tastes.

As many researchers have documented over the decades, there is no question that socioeconomic differences matter. But these structural differences in and of themselves are not sufficient for creating class categorizations, identities, and ranking. Rather, it is through interactions that given socioeconomic positions take on meaning in the daily lives and encounters with other people. Without these actions, involving the taking and acting out of class symbols, there would not be class categories in the Coffee Shop.

There are similarities in what occurs in the Coffee Shop and previous literature on class. For example, the value of a physical work ethic has been found in studies of working classes (Halle 1984; Ferree 1987; Rosen 1987; Rubin 1976, 1995), the significance of volunteer work has been found among upper-class women (Ostrander 1984; Daniels 1987), and the new middle classes, comprised of highly educated professionals such as academics and artists, tend to value liberal political and social orientations in

their work (Brint 1985; Lamont 1987; Brooks and Manza 1997). Bourdieu (1984) outlines the preferences for music, food, reading material, sports, travel, and entertainment that demarcate socioeconomic positions, some of which correspond to what I found in the Coffee Shop.

Yet these studies assume two things that I did not find in the Coffee Shop. First, these studies define class membership based on occupation, income, and wealth. In the Coffee Shop, these objective criteria were neither necessary nor sufficient for class categorization. For example, while the new middle class is usually believed to be comprised of highly educated professionals, within the Coffee Shop and town, Amy sought a similar class category although she had not graduated from college, works as a substitute teacher, and makes crafts to sell locally rather than working as a professor or professional artist. Similarly, Jean was able to be categorized with Gigi, a wealthy summer resident, and distanced from the working-class women at the counter. Thus, class categories are not merely about wealth, education, and occupational prestige. Rather, they are outcomes of performances and interaction. This is similar to what Anderson (1976) and Warner and Lunt (1941) find—stratification systems are systems of patterned and selective, symbolic action and interaction.

What I observed in the Coffee Shop, however, is also different from what Anderson (1976) and Warner and Lunt (1941) found. In the Coffee Shop, there was a class system but no set stratification system. Unlike Anderson's study, no one group deferred to another. Instead, there was an ongoing struggle between the groups to gain status relative to each other with no one accepting a lower rank. What emerges from the Coffee Shop is that the process of doing class does not necessarily result in a set system of inequality but rather involves efforts to situate one's own class higher, not lower, than the others in any resulting system of inequality.

This is something often missed in research on social class. It is assumed that differences in income, formal education, and occupation rank people into a fixed, predetermined hierarchy. While it is unquestionably important that people have sufficient access to resources to live a healthy and full life, other important aspects of class are overlooked when the focus is solely on socioeconomic differences. When the micro situations of classed interactions are observed, it is not so clear that individuals of different class categories agree on or experience a predetermined ranking (Collins 2000). For example, while those categorized as upper class may define themselves as superior in ways to those categorized as working class, it is also likely that those categorized as working class do not define themselves as inferior, but rather likely superior in ways, to those categorized as upper class. Doing class involves an ongoing struggle for class status.

In this paper, I discuss what I found in the Coffee Shop. It is admittedly a unique setting. Yet it is situated in a town where similar patterns emerge (Yodanis 2002). Throughout the town, women and men use socioeconomic-associated behaviors, tastes, and values, often represented by the wealthy summer colony, the back-to-the-landers “from away,” or the hardworking local way of life to do class. In other micro situations, with different local symbols of social class and with greater intersections in the process of doing class, gender, and race, people may well do class in different ways. Other research approaches, including more constructionist, discursive approaches, may also reveal additional perspectives on how people do class. The opportunities for future research remain wide open.

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