

# Representing Radcliffe: Perceptions and Consequences of Social Class

Joan M. Ostrove<sup>1,3</sup> and Abigail J. Stewart<sup>2</sup>

---

Using retrospective data from a sample of women who graduated from Radcliffe College in 1964, this paper examines the perceptions (what women notice) and consequences (how it makes them feel) of social class during college in these women's lives. The majority of women acknowledged that social class was salient at Radcliffe by stating so directly, by noticing members of different class groups, and/or by mentioning their own class backgrounds. In addition, women consistently perceived two markers of social class: exclusivity and the differences between public and private high school graduates. Surprisingly, there were no differences by social class background in the rates of these perceptions; social class indicators were equally apparent to women from different social class backgrounds. However, most commonly among women from working-class backgrounds, there were psychological consequences of social class that were manifested in feeling bad about themselves. In order to understand the psychology of social class most fully, it seems important to distinguish between perception and consequence in the psychological study of social class, and to pay attention to the impact not only of people's backgrounds, but of social class cues in the environments in which they operate.

---

**KEY WORDS:** Social class; college; women.

---

## INTRODUCTION

*The Clifflie: many faces, one soul. Beneath yards of straight hair, behind pale lips and eyes, she smiles an eternally self-satisfied secret smile. She is sure of herself even in railroad stations. She walks loudly and firmly on polished floors. She is a Clifflie. (Levine, Harvard-Radcliffe Yearbook, 1965)*

An artifact of the recent but distant past, this passage points to the gender, race, and social class features of Radcliffe College in the early 1960s. It was an environment almost exclusively populated by White women from economically and educationally privileged backgrounds.

Historically, higher education has played a critical role in the social class structure of the United States. College has served as a vehicle both for social mobility and for the maintenance of social class position, although it remains difficult to talk about the class-based nature of university life and culture. As Maher (in press) noted, "In the academy, a place where expert thinking about social matters is meant to take place, class is a particularly obscure topic. University is the place where working people go precisely to *change* their class by gaining credentials . . . middle class people go to maintain and enhance theirs" (pp. 14-15).

As one of the oldest and most prestigious schools in the country, Harvard University is perhaps the epitome of this pattern: it is the ultimate sign of having "made it" for some, an expectation from birth for others. Regardless of one's origins, Harvard represents the elite in higher education and it serves an important function in the maintenance of U.S. upper

---

<sup>1</sup>University of California, San Francisco, California 94143-0844.

<sup>2</sup>University of Michigan.

<sup>3</sup>Correspondence should be directed to Joan M. Ostrove, Program in Health Psychology, University of California, San Francisco, 1350 7th Avenue, CSBPS 211, San Francisco, California 94143-0844. e-mail: ostrove@itsa.ucsf.edu

class culture. As Domhoff (1983) noted, the socialization of members of the upper class is accomplished in part by a “distinctive education” including private preschools, day schools, and boarding schools. For those in the upper class, higher education is obtained at one of a small number of private universities, and “Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford head the list” (p. 24).

While there is an important “social class story” to be told here, part of which will be the primary focus of this paper, this is also a raced and gendered tale. The history of racial segregation and persistent racial discrimination in the U.S. meant that colleges that were once only open to Whites (who also had to be Protestant, particularly at the elite schools like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, mentioned above) have remained predominantly White through the present time, with relatively few exceptions. In 1927, there were more than 13,000 Black college students in the U.S., but only 11% of them were in predominantly White colleges (Solomon, 1985). In 1961, a survey of 135 (historically White) colleges in the U.S. found that these schools had 3% African-American and 2% Asian-American students in their graduating classes that year (Harris, 1972). Today, students of color comprise 28% of those enrolled in institutions of higher education (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). At elite women’s colleges, this pattern held. In 1926, W. E. B. DuBois noted,

Vassar had graduated but one Negro student and did not know it at the time. Bryn Mawr and Barnard have tried desperately to exclude them. Radcliffe, Wellesley, and Smith have treated them with tolerance and even cordiality. Many small institutions or institutions with one or two Negro students have been gracious and kind toward them, particularly in the Middle West. But on the whole, the attitude of northern institutions is one which varies from tolerance to active hostility. (quoted in Solomon, 1985, p. 143)

In 1900, women earned 17% of all bachelor’s degrees in the United States; by 1964, women represented 38% of the fall enrollment in colleges and universities; now women represent a bit more than half of all college students (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Until relatively recently, women were also educated differently than men were (see Fox, 1989; Solomon, 1985), and the social class mobility or maintenance function of higher education was slightly different for women until the middle part of this century. As Solomon (1985) explains,

For the poorest Americans, college was out of the question and beyond expectation. Yet the availability of money did not make college a given in families that discounted either the intellectual or economic advantages for their daughters. The established eastern elites . . . preferred to educate daughters privately at home, in boarding school, and through travel abroad. New rich millionaires obsessed with making good marriages for their daughters imitated the patterns of the older families . . . Both sets of families prepared daughters for a life of leisure, not work. (p. 64)

While there were considerable fluctuations in philosophies of women’s education and in how those women who did attend college used their college educations, the late 1940s saw a backlash against the more progressive attitudes that had prevailed since the 1920s (see Solomon, 1985 for an extensive history). During this time, and particularly during the 1950s, “few college women had clear vocational goals, and most attended for the general education, prestige, and social life” (Fox, 1989, p. 220). While college was providing men with access to certain professions, it was in large part providing women with access to certain men. It offered a chance for women to “marry up” or to “find one of their own kind.” Before the 1970s and the changes in gender role expectations brought about in large part by the Women’s Movement, relatively fewer of the women who attended college—particularly elite colleges—used it to pursue their own careers. As one woman who attended Radcliffe described it:

I arrived at Harvard in the fall of 1963 fresh from a [private, all girls] boarding school that still boasted much of the same faculty as it had had in my mother’s era and all of the same rules. It had prepared me perfectly for life in the 1930s. I did not expect to do anything after college, or to be anything except a wife. I wasn’t happy about that expectation, mind you, but I believed in it. I certainly expected to be *pure* when I married, and I hoped at least to marry a Harvard man. (quoted in Zweigenhaft, 1993, p. 111)

In fact, this was the very message imparted to Radcliffe women. Throughout the 1950s, the president of Radcliffe, W. K. Jordan, “informed entering freshmen . . . that their education would prepare them to be splendid wives and mothers, and their reward might be to marry Harvard men” (Solomon, 1985, p. 192). No doubt absorbing this perspective, Harvard undergraduates themselves echoed this view. One wrote in the “Radcliffe” section of the 1962 Harvard Yearbook,

[The Harvard undergraduate] seeks companionship in Radcliffe, the Adam's rib of Harvard. At the end of his search is a substitute mother, a playmate, an intellectual inspiration, a status symbol, or a wife. All the way along his search, he will wonder what he means when he calls home . . . and says, "It's okay, Mother, she's a Radcliffe girl."

In addition to the gender differences in the function of education in the United States, co-education itself was not the norm at elite private colleges and universities in New England until the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Fox, 1989; Solomon, 1985). Many elite private men's colleges, including Harvard, had "sister schools" with whom they had dances and other social events. Harvard's sister school, Radcliffe, was among those with the closest geographical proximity to its brother school and Radcliffe women took classes with Harvard men. However, they lived in separate dormitories, ate in separate cafeterias, and were excluded from entry into Harvard's undergraduate library. In an essay in the 1965 *Harvard-Radcliffe Yearbook*, Faye Levine described the Radcliffe experience:

Radcliffe is nowhere. Its essence is its own nonexistence . . . We were never part of something. It just was, here, inorganic, like a great hulk without beginning or end. We passed it by. We touched it like home base, for four years, but we didn't dwell in it. It was nothing, blank, dumb. Harvard was reality, the beginning and the end, everything: but for us always a dream. Harvard was reality, but through a glass.

Levine makes clear—as do others—that the experience of attending Radcliffe was partly about gender, and partly about social class. In a response to a question about social class at Radcliffe in the early 1960s, a member of the Radcliffe Class of 1964 said, "I think social class was still a real, but subtle phenomenon at Radcliffe though perhaps . . . it was a bit less obvious than at Harvard . . . because . . . in the early 60s we were all 'lower class'—we were women!" Levine wrote, in a similar vein,

Being at Radcliffe means nothing more than being a girl at Harvard. It is a tricky business, since everyone knows there are no girls at Harvard. Just when you are beginning to forget, to enjoy the myriad resources of this exciting community, Pow! Somebody triumphantly points out that you are just a girl and makes you go back to start.

What can we learn both about gender and about social class by examining women's retrospective representations of social class when they were students at Radcliffe College in the 1960s? Admittedly, this

is a very particular group of people, at a particular place during a particular time. At the same time, understanding more about their relationship to the institution that perhaps more than any other represents the U.S. upper class in higher education can teach us a great deal about the perceptions and consequences of social class—an underexplored area of both women's and men's psychological lives.

There is a growing empirical, autobiographical, and anecdotal literature about the *consequences* of class background with respect to individuals' experiences of college (see, for example, Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993; Torgovnick, 1994), some of which has focused specifically on Harvard (e.g., Mar, 1995, Zweigenhaft, 1993) and Radcliffe (e.g., Maher, in press; Ostrove, in preparation; Ostrove & Stewart, 1994; Stewart & Ostrove, 1993). The vast majority of this work highlights the experience of people from working-class backgrounds, both men and women, people of color and Whites: their feelings of marginality and isolation in worlds that were so different from those they were raised in. As hooks (1993)—an African American, raised working-class scholar—described her experience at Stanford University,

Though I hung with students who were supposedly radical and chic, we did not discuss class. I talked to no one about the sources of my shame, how it hurt me to witness the contempt shown the brown-skinned Filipina maids who cleaned our rooms, or later my concern about the one hundred dollars a month I paid for a room off-campus, which was more than half of what my parents paid for rent. (p. 101)

In describing her first year at Smith College, after growing up a "town" granddaughter of a college maid, Smith (1993), a White woman, said, "my first years were bewildering, marked more often than they might have been by shame and despair" (p. 135).

In research about the role that social class background played in women's experiences at both Radcliffe and Smith Colleges, Ostrove (in preparation; see also Stewart & Ostrove, 1993) found that women from working-class backgrounds were significantly more likely than women from middle- or upper-class backgrounds to report feelings of intimidation, isolation, and unpreparedness. In contrast, women from upper-class backgrounds were more likely to report an assumption of belonging and entitlement: it was expected that they, like their mothers and aunts before them, would attend colleges like these (Ostrove, in preparation).

In 1995, the *Harvard Alumni Magazine* published an article entitled, "Blue collar, crimson blazer: Reflections of class on campus." In it, Elaine Mar, a child of working-class Chinese immigrants, shared her own—unexpected—experiences of surprise and alienation at Harvard in the 1980s, provided anecdotes from other raised-working-class students throughout Harvard's history, and traced Harvard's history of scholarship awards. In 1840, Harvard instituted a loan system. With the end of World War II and the introduction of the G.I. Bill, the university began to admit students without regard to their ability to pay. More and more students from poor and working-class families were therefore able to attend the school, although in Mar's class of 1988, only 11% of the students came from families in which neither parent had attended college. As sociologist Lee Rainwater explained in an interview with Mar, "It seemed clear to me [when I was teaching a class on the urban working class] that Harvard was not a place where it was easy to be a working-class student. Although Harvard has moved toward admissions that are not based on ability to pay, its culture has not moved to that point. Harvard has not taken its own culture into account" (1995, p. 49).

We (JMO and AJS) came to this project about understanding women's relationship to the "classedness" of Radcliffe College with our own personal connections to elite, private, New England colleges. We each arrived at college (in 1983 at Williams College for JMO; in 1967 at Mount Holyoke College for AJS) from particular locations and at particular historical moments that made us aware of the class-based nature of these schools. For JMO, as a White, upper-middle class Jewish woman, entering Williams was an immersion in the unfamiliar—and somewhat strange—world of reserved, upper-class Gentiles. To AJS, also White, from a marriage of mixed religious backgrounds (Jewish and Catholic) and her own mixed class experience (educational and cultural privilege combined with extended periods of economic instability), the world at Mount Holyoke appeared to be filled primarily with bright, wealthy girls with few personal ambitions beyond marriage. Our own experiences of felt "difference" in college have, then, both stimulated and fed our interest in other women's experience at Radcliffe in a slightly different time.

We wondered whether generally women notice aspects of the environment that are related to social class. We also wanted to consider how an individual's

own social class background might affect what they noticed. As is clear from other work described above, social class background does seem to have psychological *consequences* for the ways students experience elite college environments. Is the same true for students' ability to perceive, describe, or articulate the class-based nature of the college environment? Is *perception* also differentially linked to social class position? In the remainder of this paper, we will use data from a sample of women who graduated from Radcliffe College in 1964 to examine the personal consequences, as well as women's perceptions, of the college environment.

## METHOD

In 1996, 102 women (virtually all of whom were White) from the Radcliffe Class of 1964 for whom we could identify social class background provided responses to a question asking them to describe what they noticed about social class at Radcliffe while they were there. These women were participants in a longitudinal study of women of their graduating class conducted by Stewart (see Stewart, 1978, 1980; Stewart & Salt, 1981; Stewart & Vandewater, 1993 for further descriptions of the study and the sample). In terms of their current social class status, this was a highly educated sample: 36.5% had earned master's level degrees, and another 46% had doctoral level degrees (MD, JD, PhD). The vast majority (89%) participated in the paid labor force, primarily (about 80%) in administrative and professional careers (e.g., education, law, medicine, social work). In 1996, their average personal income was between \$40–50,000 per year; their average household income was between \$100–120,000 per year.

Social class can be defined, and therefore measured, in a number of different ways (see, for example, Coleman & Rainwater, 1978; Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958 for classic sociological and psychological discussions of assessing social class and social standing; for more recent reviews, see Mueller & Parcel, 1981; Nakao & Treas, 1994). Income, education level, and occupation are among the various quantitative indicators most often thought to be relevant to social class. In addition, Domhoff (1983) suggested that private secondary school attendance is a useful marker of membership in the upper class.

In the Radcliffe sample, the women were asked about their parents' educational and occupational

histories, thus providing two of the three standard social class indicators with which to code their class backgrounds. Information about the kind of secondary schools they attended before college was also available from books prepared on the occasion of important class reunions (decades, twenty-fifth, etc.). Using a combination of all of this information, women were considered to have been raised in *working-class families* if they attended public secondary schools and neither of their parents graduated from college, or if their fathers had a rating of skilled laborer/clerical worker (4) or lower (semiskilled worker, unskilled worker, not in paid labor force; occupations in these categories include security guard, tool and die maker, postal worker) on the 7-point Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) scale of socioeconomic status. Women whose fathers had a rating of administrative worker (5) or higher (minor professional or major professional; occupations in these categories include certified public accountants, schoolteachers, physicians) on the Hollingshead and Redlich SES scale and who had at least one parent who went to college were classified as being from *middle-class backgrounds*. All women who were classified as middle class went to public high school, with two exceptions: eight women (13% of the middle-class women) went to private secondary schools (private day or boarding, not parochial,<sup>4</sup> schools) but their fathers were not major professionals, and ten women (16%) went to private high schools (private day or boarding, not parochial, schools) and their fathers were academics (a notoriously difficult occupation to classify in terms of social class). Finally, women who attended private secondary schools (*prep schools or boarding schools, not parochial schools*), whose fathers received a rating of major professional (7; e.g., corporate executive, attorney, physician) on the Hollingshead and Redlich SES scale, and who had at least one parent with a college education were considered to have been raised in *upper-class families*. Using this classification scheme, approximately 13% of Radcliffe women were considered to be from working-class backgrounds; 61% of them were from middle-class backgrounds; and 26% of them were classified as having been raised in the upper class.

<sup>4</sup>None of the women who participated in this wave of data collection attended a private parochial high school. For women in the entire Radcliffe Class of 1964 for whom we have secondary school information, only one attended a parochial high school.

Eighty-nine of the 102 women for whom we had social class background information answered the following question: "We would like to ask you about the role that social class played in people's experiences at Radcliffe. Was social class important at Radcliffe? Did it affect you directly, or did you observe its effects on others?" All responses to this question were typed by research assistants and could therefore be coded separately from the complete questionnaires. We (JMO and AJS) read through all of the responses once and developed a coding system that will be described below to capture the variety of responses. Without knowing anything about the social class background of the participants (except what could be discerned from the participants' responses) both authors coded a subset of the responses ( $n = 20$ ) and the remainder were coded by the first author. The first author's interrater reliability was .91 (percent agreement).

Our coding system was derived from the data in order to capture the range of answers to our question. Responses fell into three broad categories. Two assessed *perceptions* of class: (1) the ways in which women acknowledged that social class mattered; (2) the kinds of markers they noticed about social class. One assessed *consequences*: (3) how they personally felt in terms of social class.

Under the domain of perception, five themes indicated an *acknowledgement that social class mattered*: (1) salience of class in general (social class is described as at least somewhat important, as opposed to being explicitly described as unimportant); (2) noticed upper class students (response indicated an awareness of wealthy classmates, their activities or lifestyle); (3) noticed middle class students; (4) noticed poor or working class students (including descriptions of people who had less money); (5) any mention of their own class background.

Also related to perception, two themes served as *markers of social class*: (1) descriptions of exclusivity (e.g., "Prep private school students hang out with each other only") and/or appearances or pretense (e.g., "I pitied the upper crusties for having to worry about white shoes before Memorial Day and society-type social life"); and (2) noticing a distinction between public and private high school graduates (e.g., "Girls from private schools did not easily become friends with girls from public schools"). Categories were not mutually exclusive; thus, the previous example would score for reference to upper

class students (“upper crusties”) as well as for reference to appearance.

Finally, one theme captured a consequence of class: *how class made women feel*. This category included all descriptions of feeling bad (left out, different, etc.) in some way connected to class (“I believe that social class affected me by exacerbating my lack of self-esteem and anxiety”).

## RESULTS

As noted earlier, 89 out of 102 (87.3%) of the participants about whom we had social class background information answered the social class question (i.e., they did not leave that question blank on their otherwise completed questionnaire). Answering the question was not a function of class background: 84.6% of the raised working class; 85.5% of the raised middle class; and 92.6% of the raised upper class women answered the question ( $\chi^2 = .95$ , n.s.).

### Perceptions of Social Class: Acknowledging that Class Mattered

Of the women who provided a response to the question, “We would like to ask you about the role that social class played in people’s experiences at Radcliffe. Was social class important at Radcliffe? Did it affect you directly, or did you observe its effects on others?” three-quarters (77.5%) described social class as having been important in some way while they were at Radcliffe. Again, describing class as salient did not vary according to the social class background of the respondents ( $\chi^2 = 1.65$ , n.s.). One woman from a working class background said this was a “Great question!” and went on to say that social class was a key reason for her leaving Radcliffe in the middle of her time there. Another woman started with, “Social class was one of the great unmentionables of the ‘60s and had as much impact on me as my formal education.” Women from upper-class backgrounds had responses such as, “Very important!” or “*Very* [important]—it forms the whole character of Harvard-Radcliffe (this would take a *book*).” A middle-class respondent said, “It was very clear that there were social class stratifications of very intricate sorts.” Women from different class backgrounds were also just as likely to explicitly say that social class did not matter at all at Radcliffe (about one-quarter of the respondents who answered

the questions): “Did not seem relevant to me” (raised working class); “I was totally unaware of social class at Radcliffe” (raised middle class); “I cannot remember any role or effect on me” (raised upper class).

Clearly, something about social class at Radcliffe resonated strongly with many of our respondents. How, exactly, did they articulate this salience? For most people, regardless of class background, the most salient aspects of class at Radcliffe had to do with the upper class: 36.4% of the raised working-class, 45.3% of the raised middle-class, and 32% of the raised upper-class women mentioned noticing the upper class women. They said things like “I, who had sold Christmas ribbon door-to-door yearly from age 10, [now] went to school with the wealthy and social” (raised working class). “Going to Radcliffe was my first exposure to the upper class and those with ‘old money’” (raised middle class). “Obviously, some people were rich” (raised upper class).

While the upper class was quite salient to people from different class backgrounds, considerably fewer people explicitly mentioned middle- or working-class students, though they were more likely to notice working- than middle-class ones. Thirteen percent of the raised middle-class and 8% of the raised upper-class women mentioned women from poor or working-class backgrounds in their answers (“Folks from blue-collar families seemed to have a much rougher time socially [fitting in] than I did”). In order to code this category, a respondent had to write about people other than herself (since there was a separate category for writing about one’s own class). Thus, although none of the raised working-class respondents mentioned other working-class students, they did often write about themselves. The raised working-class women also did not explicitly mention middle-class students. Almost 4% (3.8) of the raised middle-class women did mention middle-class students, as did one of the raised upper-class students.

### Perceptions of Social Class: Markers of Class

While some women’s perceptions of the upper class were confined merely to taking notice, others’ included specific mentions of exclusivity (e.g., cliques or other exclusive practices) or pretense (acting arrogant or concerned with outward appearance), but again, this did not vary significantly by social class background: 36.4% of raised working-class, 37.8% of raised middle-class, and 36% of raised upper-class

participants ( $\chi^2 = .02$ , n.s.) mentioned exclusivity or pretense. While the rate of mentioning exclusivity or pretense did not vary by class background, the details of women's responses did reflect their own social class positions. As one woman from a working-class background said, "[There were] cliques. There were groups I could never have been a part of." One middle-class respondent said, "I always had the sense that some girls cliqued together based on similar very society-centered backgrounds." Another said, "One weekend I got snowed in at the home of a wealthy classmate. A young woman in the house party got drunk and punctuated her speech with 'you know, our kind of people.' I felt I was in disguise." A woman from an upper-class background noted that she was "struck by the conscious pretense at Harvard." Another raised upper-class woman said, "My family was 'upper crust' and I tended to hang out with others like me."

Noticing exclusivity was not the only way in which women took note of the upper-class culture and people at Radcliffe and Harvard. Other respondents pointed to other, more painful aspects of upper-class culture (such as the ways in which it was constraining, or provided material but not necessarily emotional resources). These ranged from the automatic—and sometimes unwarranted—associations between Harvard and elitism (which may make people feel bad about saying they went there) to the realization that "money can't buy everything." One woman from a middle-class background noted,

I came to Radcliffe extremely naive about social classes in general . . . People kept saying or implying that a "Cliffie" [a Radcliffe student] must be from the upper classes, which I've heard even more since leaving college (oh, you went to Harvard? You must be a real snob). At Radcliffe I met other students whose life experiences till then did distinguish them from mine, and thought of myself as ordinary in comparison, but did not feel like a second-class person . . . The negative attitude toward Harvard and Radcliffe among the general intellectual public [has made me] cautious about mentioning I went there.

Another middle-class respondent said,

Daughters of wealthy and/or famous parents had had a wider range of experience prior to arriving at Radcliffe than I had, and they had the opportunity to pursue a wider range of activities while at Radcliffe . . . Money and social access never appeared to be a concern. However, upper social class did not guarantee happiness or freedom from family problems—this was very obvious.

Another marker of social class was the distinction between public and private high school graduates at Radcliffe. Public vs. private secondary education was a salient aspect of the social class story for some (12.4%) of the participants. As with all of the other categories we have presented thus far, there were no differences by social class background in noticing the distinction between public and private high school graduates ( $\chi^2 = .40$ , n.s.), although the women's own backgrounds made a difference in where they placed themselves in this distinction. Among the responses provided by women from working-class backgrounds were: "When I entered Radcliffe, the salient distinction for me was whether one came from a public or a private school background. People from private schools were definitely other" and "Girls from private schools did not easily become friends with those from public schools." Women from middle-class backgrounds (most of whom themselves, by definition for this research project, had gone to public school) provided answers such as, "I was aware of a large prep school population" and "[T]here were certainly 'preppie' circles . . . [who] did seem to be a world of their own. The rest of us were pretty egalitarian though there were subtle groupings like Eastern vs. other places, rich vs. middle class, private vs. public school." One woman from an upper-class background said,

There was a division between the girls who had attended boarding schools and those who attended high schools. Those on each side were conscious of the differences the other exhibited in speech, dress, and expectation. To some extent, but not entirely, the girls who had gone to boarding school dated the boys who joined the clubs at Harvard. I am afraid that those girls may have given less thought to careers. If so, I'm in that group.

### Consequences of Social Class: Feelings Connected to Class

So far, we have provided a broad picture of how women who attended Radcliffe perceived social class to matter, or not, while they were there. As we have seen, the rates at which women *perceived* a number of different aspects of the social class environment did not vary by class background, though sometimes the content of their answers did reflect the backgrounds from which they came. We did assess one *consequence* of the social class environment at Radcliffe that seemed somewhat more related to social class background. This was the extent to which

women described negative feelings related to their perceptions of class. Almost a third (27.3%) of the raised working-class women's, 18.9% of the raised middle-class women's, and 12% of the raised upper-class women's answers included some description of "feeling bad" that often articulated a relationship to the dominant upper-class culture ( $\chi^2 = 1.29$ , n.s.). One raised working-class woman answered the question this way: "My perceived inferiority in dress, style, and ability to engage in profound and scintillating conversation left me with a lack of confidence that is still a part of me." Importantly, some raised working-class women noted both ways in which they felt superior to upper-class students, as well as ways they felt bad. Often this sense of superiority focused on issues of character, as in this "nobler" woman's response:

Coming from a [rural New England] public high school and parents who were not college graduates, I felt I was: 1) nobler than the preppy students; 2) out of my league; 3) an interloper; 4) a character in a novel; 5) an admissions mistake.

Consistent with this sense of being "nobler than the preppy students," Ostrove and Stewart (1994) reported on a woman from a working-class background who, reflecting on the participation of students from Harvard and Radcliffe in the Civil Rights movement, said that other students were headed to Washington, D.C. "to drink and they were going to party and they were wondering who else was going and these were not noble reasons for participating in my humble mind, for participating in a political movement" (p. 294).

Some middle-class women's responses reflected their closer (but for some not close enough) proximity to the upper class: "I always felt I didn't cut it with the elite. I was *close* but not really of it. That felt hurtful to me. I can't imagine it wasn't hurtful to others." Another raised middle-class woman said, "In no other place before or after did I feel so keenly that I belonged to a specific social class and that I had no ability to interact with the upper classes."

For women from upper-class backgrounds, their position within the upper class, and the extent to which they wanted to separate themselves from their background, related to their feeling bad about themselves. As one woman said, "Kids from eastern prep schools . . . seemed so much more sophisticated, even though I had gone to a private school also . . . I often felt like an outsider and I'm sure others did too." Another woman from an upper-class back-

ground described the feelings of constraint associated with being a part of that culture at Radcliffe:

[My] first two years I was a preppy . . . and went to [social club] plays and dated an 'Owl Club' guy . . . *Very* restricting. *Very* safe . . . Thank God, after sophomore year, broke out, made other friends. Too little too late, realized how restricting and damaging the first life was.

## DISCUSSION

When asked directly about social class at Radcliffe more than 30 years after their graduation, women from the Class of 1964 clearly articulated that it was a salient aspect of their college experience. It appears that most women, regardless of class background, "perceived social class" in some way: they stated that it was important, they discussed the class backgrounds of their classmates (particularly the ones from upper-class backgrounds), and they mentioned their own social class backgrounds.

Two features of social class were fairly common among the women's responses: exclusivity and the distinction between public and private high school graduates. In many ways, these represent markers of the upper class more than of social class in general. Domhoff (1983) has noted that a hallmark of upper class culture and institutions is exclusivity: upper class young people receive "exclusive" educations, adults belong to "exclusive" clubs, families throw "exclusive" debutante balls. Indeed, a major function of the socialization of upper-class people is to isolate them from the rest of society. As Ostrander (1984) noted, many upper-class families sent their children to private schools so they could be "separated from ordinary people" (p. 85). It is not surprising that this pattern was carried out by upper-class students at Radcliffe and was noticeable to the Radcliffe women. The maintenance of class position is a valued and strongly encouraged aspect of upper-class life. There can be strong sanctions against deviation from this path for upper-class children, and insuring the generational transmission of social status is an important function of the women in upper-class families (Ostrander, 1984). Some Radcliffe women from upper-class backgrounds were unwilling to pay the price of such exclusivity. As one woman from an upper-class background said, "I had friends from every different social class at Radcliffe. Some of my friends restricted their social life to people of their economic



class and background, but I did not. They missed out.”

It is interesting, then, that while women from middle-class backgrounds made up the majority of the Radcliffe class, and women from working-class backgrounds were the most “different,” it was aspects of the upper-class culture and lifestyle there that were most salient to the women. This emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the class-based nature of the environment, and/or to the culture of the institution (for discussions of the cultures of different educational institutions, see Stewart & Ostrove, 1993; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Zwerling, 1976).

We did not find that noticing class or particular class markers—what we have been referring to as “perceptions of social class”—was a function of class background. According to standpoint theory (Harding, 1991; see also hooks, 1984; Brown, 1991), the “view from the margin” (in this case, presumably, working-class background) is more detailed, more complicated, “stronger,” than the view from the center. McGuire’s distinctiveness theory also predicts that those in the “minority” are more likely to mention spontaneously their “distinctive characteristic” in their self-descriptions (for empirical support of the theory, see Cota & Dion, 1986; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). The other side of this argument suggests that privileged positions make it more difficult (or less necessary) to “see” or differentiate among members of less privileged groups (see, e.g., Fiske, 1993). If this is so, why did women from all three social class locations (standpoints) hold comparable views? Perhaps the environment at Radcliffe was so saturated with social class cues that social class was unusually salient. Alternatively, perhaps we circumvented the spontaneity of the “view from the margin” by explicitly asking about social class. There may be a difference between what people are able to notice or talk about when asked and what they (are able or forced to) notice when they are in the middle of the situation. As one respondent from an upper-class background insightfully noted,

I never thought too much about it then because I was, am, in I guess you would call it, the elite social class. I had attended a prestigious girls’ boarding school. My family was ‘upper crust’ and I tended to hang out with others like me . . . The boys I liked were in clubs and I was popular. So I didn’t much think about others.

It is also possible that women’s ability to perceive social class at Radcliffe retrospectively is a function of their current class position, although previous work with this group (Ostrove, in preparation) found that social class effects were a function of class background and not current class. In addition, there are no currently working-class women in the sample (though there is some range in their current incomes and in the relative status of their own and their partners’ occupations). It may be important in future work to look more specifically at the role that current “marginal status” in any domain may have on class consciousness.

In any case, the consequences of social class—how women felt about themselves when reflecting on the social class environment of Radcliffe—seemed somewhat more likely to vary according to class background. The distinction between *perception* (what people notice) and *consequence* (how it makes them feel), therefore, may be an important one. Generally, we found more evidence for an injurious impact of the Radcliffe environment for those women who came from less privileged backgrounds. However, we note that for some women a sense of greater personal virtue, grounded in hardship and hard work, tempered the sense of inadequacy and deviance they experienced at Radcliffe.

One interesting question that emerges from these findings is the following: What is it that leads or allows people to notice social class if it is not (only) their own social class position? What accounts for the difference between the woman just quoted, who noticed very important things about social class even as she acknowledged that there was a way in which her very background “protected” her from having to notice them, and other women who said that class was not important? Or between women from working-class backgrounds, some of whom said class shaped their experiences at Radcliffe more than anything else, others of whom said it was irrelevant?

It is of course possible that the themes and trends we found in these data about how women perceived and experienced social class during college are specific to graduates of the prestigious, New England college we studied. It will be useful in the future to ask these kinds of questions of both women and men who attend many different kinds of institutions of higher education. In addition, there may be important distinctions between what people can notice

when asked retrospectively and what they spontaneously attend to "in the moment."

In general, though, because social class is a powerful force in shaping our assumptions about and views of the world, it is particularly important for psychologists to study it from a variety of different perspectives. Social class is a feature of our environments whether we notice it or not, and is therefore an important component of the psychological study of social context. There is much more to learn about the psychological implications of social class position and the social class environment in the lives of both women and men.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work for this paper was supported by a grant from the University of Michigan Office of the Vice President for Research, by a grant from the National Institute of Health (MH19391T32), and by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health. Data from several waves of the Radcliffe Longitudinal Study are archived at the Henry A. Murray Research Center at Radcliffe College. We are grateful to the women in the Radcliffe Longitudinal Study for their generous and thoughtful contributions to this project over many years.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, L. S. (1989). New voices, new visions: Toward a lesbian/gay paradigm for psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 13, 445-448.
- Coleman, R. P., & Rainwater, L. (1978). *Social standing in America: New dimensions of class*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cota, A. A., & Dion, K. L. (1986). Salience of gender and sex composition of *ad hoc* groups: An experimental test of distinctiveness theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 770-776.
- Domhoff, G. W. (1983). *Who rules America now?* New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Fiske, S. T. (1993). Controlling other people: The impact of power on stereotyping. *American Psychologist*, 48, 621-628.
- Fox, M. F. (1989). Women and higher education: Gender differences in the status of students and scholars. In J. Freeman (Ed.), *Women: A feminist perspective* (pp. 217-235). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Harris, S. E. (1972). A statistical portrait of higher education. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Harvard Yearbook* (1962). "Radcliffe." Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Hollingshead, A. B., & Redlich, F. C. (1958). *Social class and mental illness*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1993). Keeping close to home: Class and education. In M. M. Tokarczyk & E. A. Fay (Eds.), *Working-class women in the academy: Laborers in the knowledge factory* (pp. 99-111). Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Levine, F. (1965). The girls who go to Harvard. *Harvard-Radcliffe Yearbook*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Maher, F. A. (in press). Coming out. In P. Mahony & C. Zmroczek (Eds.), *Social class in feminism*.
- Mar, M. E. (November-December, 1995). Blue collar, crimson blazer: Recollections of class on campus. *Harvard Magazine*, 47-51.
- McGuire, W. J., McGuire, C. V., Child, P., & Fujioka, T. (1978). Salience of ethnicity in the spontaneous self-concept as a function of one's ethnic distinctiveness in the social environment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 511-520.
- Mueller, C. W., & Parcel, T. L. (1981). Measures of socioeconomic status: Alternatives and recommendations. *Child Development*, 52, 13-30.
- Nakao, K., & Treas, J. (1994). Updating occupational prestige and socioeconomic scores: How the new measures measure up. In P. V. Marsden (Ed.), *Sociological Methodology*, 24, 1-72.
- Ostrander, S. (1984). *Women of the upper class*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Ostrove, J. M. The persistence of social class background for women's representations of college, work, and marriage. (In preparation.)
- Ostrove, J. M., & Stewart, A. J. (1994). Meanings and uses of marginal identities: Social class at Radcliffe in the 1960s. In C. E. Franz and A. J. Stewart (Eds.), *Women creating lives: Identities, resilience, and resistance* (pp. 289-307). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Ryan, J. & Sackrey, C. (1984). *Strangers in paradise: Academics from the working class*. Boston: South End Press.
- Smith, P. C. (1993). Grandma went to Smith, all right, but she went from nine to five: A memoir. In M. M. Tokarczyk & E. A. Fay (Eds.), *Working-class women in the academy: Laborers in the knowledge factory* (pp.126-139). Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Solomon, B. M. (1985). *In the company of educated women: A history of women and higher education in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Stewart, A. J. (1978). A longitudinal study of coping styles of self-defining and socially defined women. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 46, 1079-1084.
- Stewart, A. J. (1980). Personality and situation in the prediction of women's life patterns. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 5, 195-206.
- Stewart, A. J., & Ostrove, J. M. (1993). Social class, social change, and gender: Working class women at Radcliffe and after. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 17, 475-497.
- Stewart, A. J., & Salt, P. (1981). Life stress, lifestyles, depression and illness in adult women. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40, 1063-1069.
- Stewart, A. J., & Vandewater, E. A. (1993). Career and family clocks in a transitional cohort. In K. Hulbert and D. Schuster (Eds.), *Women's lives through time: Educated American women of the twentieth century* (pp. 235-258). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tokarczyk, M. M., & Fay, E. A. (Eds.) (1993). *Working-class women in the academy: Laborers in the knowledge factory*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Torgovnick, M. D. (1996). *Crossing Ocean Parkway*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (1997). *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1997* (117th ed.). Washington, D.C.

U.S. Department of Education (1996). National Center for Educational Statistics, *Digest of Educational Statistics, 1996*, NCES 96-133, by Thomas D. Snyder; Production manager, Charlene M. Hoffman; Program analyst, Claire M. Geddes; Washington, D.C.

Zweigenhaft, R. L. (1993). Prep school and public school graduates of Harvard: A longitudinal study of the accumulation of social and cultural capital. *Journal of Higher Education*, 64, 211-225.

Zwerling, S. (1976). *Second best: The crisis of the community college*. New York: McGraw Hill.